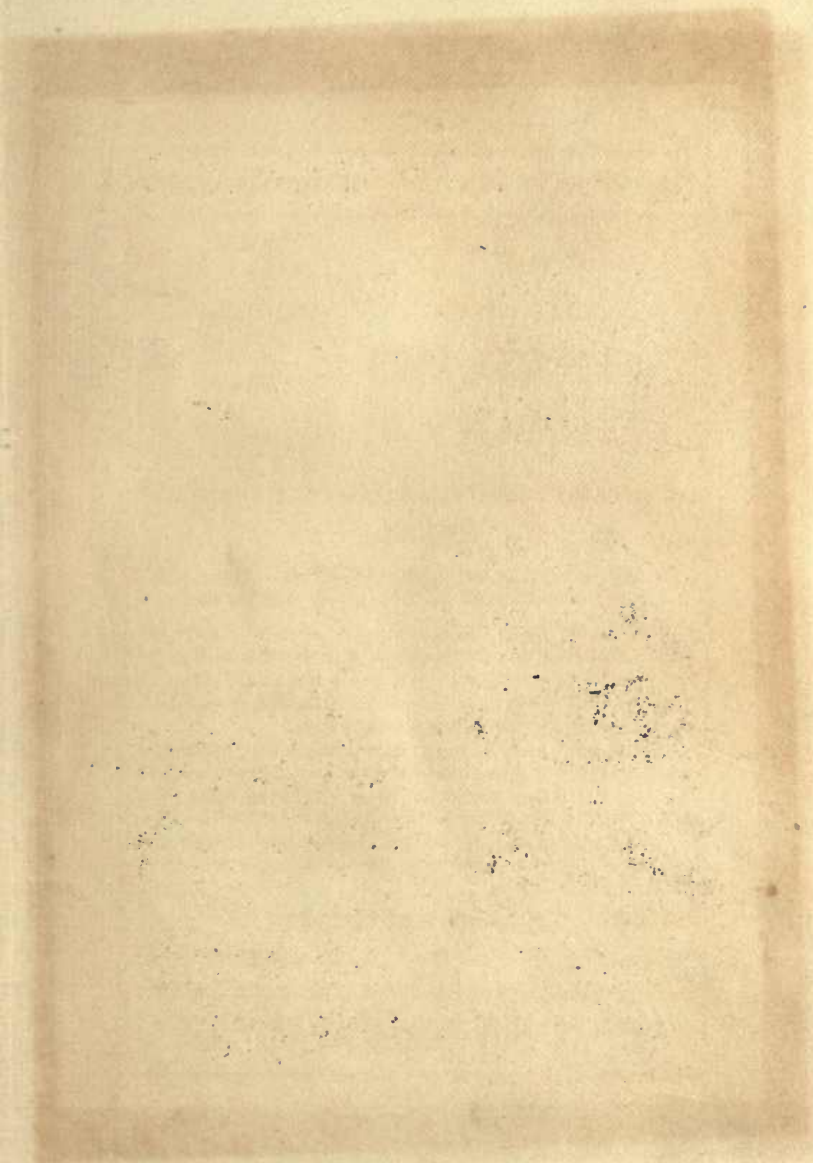


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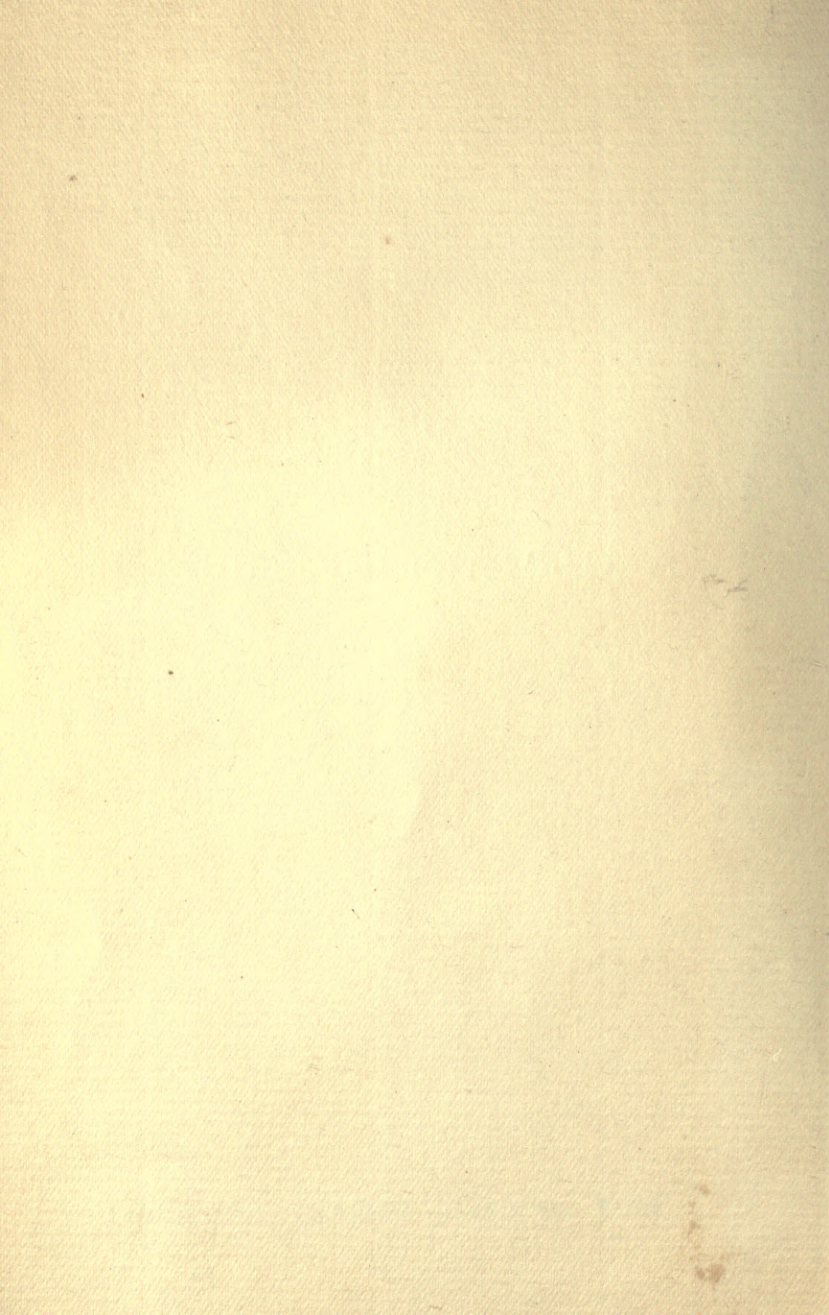


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A CAPTAIN OF MEN

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A Captain of Men

By E. ANSON MORGAN
With an Introduction by
HENRY W. MOORE

"UNARMED and alone, he placed
himself in their very midst"
(See page 266)

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A Captain of Men

By E. ANSON MORE

With a Frontispiece by
HENRY W. MOORE



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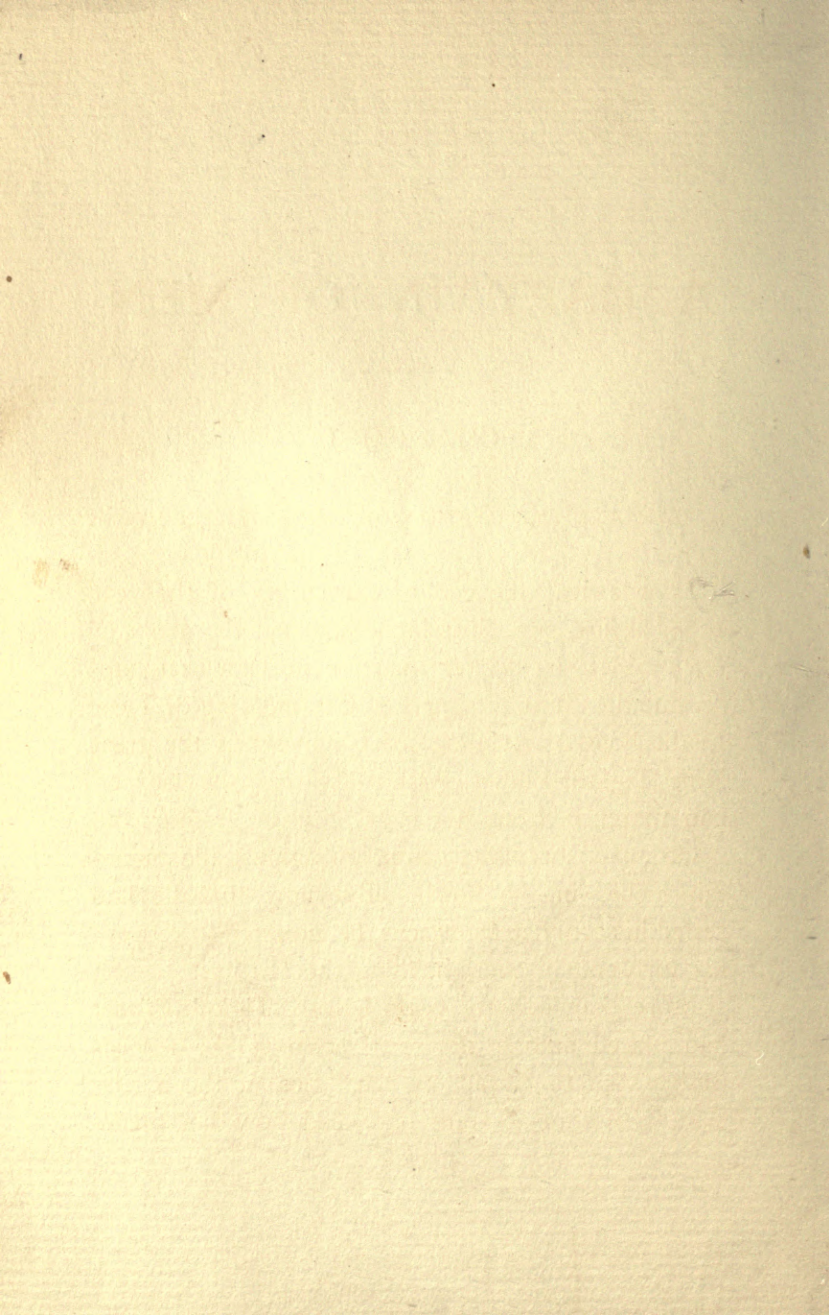
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TO
My Wife

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A CAPTAIN OF MEN

CHAPTER I.

MIRIAM AND THE CAPTAIN OF THE ASSYRIAN HORSE

It was near the end of the spring of the year 1058, before our Christian era, when the army of Assyria left its winter quarters in Damascus and became the uninvited guest of Hiram, King of Tyre. In the hope of rivalling the conquests of the great King Tiglath-Pileser, Asshur-ab-aram, the usurper, had marched from his royal city of Asshur and made an unsuccessful campaign against the mountain tribes in the north. But now that he had rested his army at Damascus, he expected to retrieve his fortunes by overwhelming the Hittites.

More than seventy years before, Tiglath-Pileser had placed among the royal archives the records of his visit to Arvad, by the "Sea of the Rising Sun." Asshur-ab-aram had read how his prede-

cessor had exacted tribute of Phœnicia, of the great fish he had caught "on an iron hook," and of the ships and wealth of that seafaring people. He, too, could add a page to history; he decided to fish in the waters of Tyre, and to see with his own eyes the splendour of the Island City.

This unexpected irruption of the conquering soldiers of the world was not at all to Hiram's liking. But it had ever been the policy of mercantile Phœnicia to avoid a conflict of force and arms. There was nothing so destructive to trade as war, and Hiram, the king, was the prince of merchants. So he made the best of an exceedingly bad matter; he disguised his loathing of the boorish and boastful Assyrian. He was lavish in hospitality, and he prayed earnestly to his gods for deliverance from the constantly repeated tales of Tiglath-Pileser and his marvellous fish.

On the night of the last of Hiram's banquets to Asshur-ab-aram, Merodach, "the Babylonian," was what we now call "officer of the day." His royal chief was over on the island eating and drinking, listening to music, and watching jugglers, mountebanks, and dancing girls. But the army was encamped just outside the walls of the city on the mainland, revelling in such plenty of food and drink as to make their stay in Tyre a scene of licensed

debauchery. It can truly be said that no army had ever been so well treated before, and the soldierly heart of Merodach, chief of horse, was bitter because of the drunkenness and laxity of the camp. Of discipline there was none; save only among his favourite arm, the cavalry, about which he dreamed, and for whose advancement in efficiency he never tired of working. A proud smile passed over his lips as he saw a group become silent when he was seen by the light of the camp-fire. They were his very own, and they alone of all the army were trained to drink their wine, and yet acknowledge fittingly an officer's presence. It pleased him greatly to see them rise and keep silence until he returned their salute.

"Your health, my lord," spoke one, soberly, and the others bared their heads while their captain tasted the wine.

"I am pleased with you, my children," he responded, smiling with a full heart at their martial appearance. "I drink to our next battle; may Asshur make it a victory." But Merodach smiled no more during his "rounds" that night.

Many of the officers were carousing with their king, and those that were kept with their commands were trying to recompense themselves by worse debauchery in the camp. With the officers absent,

or in such condition, what could be expected of the common soldiers but indescribable confusion? Everywhere could be heard the curses and obscenity of the men, the shrill, hateful laughter of even drunker women. Now his foot would trip over the prostrate form of one stupefied by drink, and now his ears would be assailed by ribald laughter and invitations to join the carouse. Skins of wine, jars of wine, flagons, — rivers of wine were there; wine of Cyprus, of Tyre, of Damascus, of Askalon, flooded the camp. Here he came upon a merry group, dancing and singing about the drooping figure of an impaled prisoner. There beyond them were others trying to join their female visitors in a chant to Ashtoreth. Guards were generally missing from their posts, or, when present, totally oblivious of their duties. Those about the royal tents huddled together in tipsy consternation when they heard the stern voice of the best soldier in the army.

From these new tents of royal purple, the gift of Hiram, and the tents where the scribes slept, forgetful of the count they must prepare before day-break, and the tents of the king's harem, Merodach went to where were parked the chariots, the pride and strength of the army. Here his patience altogether failed him, and he cursed the one guard he

found in drunken sleep so bitterly as almost to make him sober.

Now, as luck would have it, Nebo, captain of the auxiliary archers, was lying near by, snuggled close to a grunting camel for warmth. The sound of voices disturbed him, and he staggered to his feet, and stood swaying before them in drunken solemnity. He was not too far gone to be unable to recognize an officer by his dress and appearance. He had a vague consciousness of wrong-doing and shame; he as an officer should, at least, enjoy the pleasures of intoxication among his equals. It was quite beneath his dignity to be discovered sleeping by the side of a camel. And he also knew that his place was not there among the chariots; his king had impaled men for much more trivial offences. Nebo knew that he was quite guilty, but he was apt to be ugly in his cups, and he cursed Merodach for a prying meddler.

“You are a hog, Nebo; an officer should set an example of decency to his men. Faugh! you stink of stale wine and camel’s dung. You, an officer, and asleep here!”

Nebo glared savagely about him. He wished to make an insulting retort, but Merodach was gone. Kicking viciously at the drowsy camel, he drank again, then staggered toward his own quarters,

breathing vengeance against "the Babylonian dog." His foot struck a sleeping soldier and he fell. There he lay, snoring, not far from the tent he had sought.

There was something of the artist in Merodach, the dashing soldier. Although he had never been trained to use an artist's tools, his love of beauty in form and colour was shown by the changes he had made in the furniture of his horses, the accoutrements of his men. He had given personal care to the design and finish of the bosses on their harness and cross-belts. The beauty of the bronze tips to their scabbards was owing to him. And he had seen that beauty, as well as utility, should be considered in the ducks' heads on the ends of their bows. To him, more than to any other in the empire, belonged the credit of the improvement in appearance and efficiency of the Assyrian cavalry. He began a system which was to culminate under Sargon and Sennacherib, and go down with Assurbanipal, the Sardanapalus of the Grecian writers. Indeed it was this genius in the affairs connected with his favourite branch of the army which had more than once saved Merodach from the wrath and unconcealed jealousy of his king. For, although he manifested the coarseness of his origin, Asshur-ab-aram was loath to lose the aid of such a good soldier. Neither could he make himself

forget that his chief of horse had saved him and his army from annihilation under the crags of the northern mountains.

It was this instinctive love for the beautiful, this natural quickness to note lines and tints and shades, which stopped him so often during his course through the quieter portions of the camp. From where he stood he could see the braziers flaming along the causeway that Hiram was completing to connect his newer Tyre on the islands with the older part on the coast. The work was not allowed to pause day or night, and the burning pitch from Gadir ran in streams of fire into the steaming sea. And the shouts of labourers and the harsh cries of their overseers were far enough away to blend pleasantly with the more unintelligible sounds of a great city awake in the night. South of the double island were other lights marking the site of the new "Egyptian harbour." To the north rose the new temple, now almost built, and farther still blazed the fires which served as beacon-lights to the mariners seeking port. Between these extremities were shadows pierced by points of light; in the daytime these would be palaces and arsenals in this commercial centre of the world. Also above the city hung tremulously a glow caught from the countless lights beneath; the Shekinah of congre-

gated humanity. He had seen the temple in the morning and had marvelled at the splendour of its asherim, one of shining gold, the other of emerald green. His eyes had lingered lovingly over decorations of checker-work and pomegranate, carved by the hand of the great artist, Hiram Abif. But now that night hid these glories from his eyes, his inner vision increased the charms of Tyre beyond computation.

So Merodach stood before the wealth and glory of the world, and dreamed of conquest and of power. Some day all this should be his, and Assyria and he would hold in iron clasp the wealth and power of Tyre and of the Sidonians to the very ends of the sleeping sea.

The sound of voices shattered the spell of reverie, and he awoke and shook himself as if from sleep. The speakers were too distant for him to distinguish what they said, but it seemed to him that he could detect discord, that he heard two women, one commanding, the other entreating.

Not far from where he stood was one of the finest houses which adorned the slopes of the hills of the older city. Its well-kept grounds, cool arbours, and delightful fish-ponds had often attracted his admiration; and it was there he heard the voices.

Yet, although he could not understand one word

they said, the tones of the speakers moved him curiously. There was no approach to harshness in the voice that reached him the more clearly; it was, if possible, the sweeter of the two; yet it roused an unaccountable repugnance in his heart toward its owner. Its effect upon him was even stronger, and it could almost be said that it filled him with sudden loathing. For some inexplicable reason he seemed to resent the fact that one of these unknown women should have the power to make the other suffer, insomuch that he was tempted to show her of the softer voice his sympathy and his pity. Afterward this was all very strange and unaccountable to the Assyrian captain.

Soon all was again quiet, and he returned through the camp to his tent for a brief sleep before dawn. Later he was to know that he had listened to the siren voice of "my lady Tanith" of Tyre, as she commanded the attendance of Miriam, her Hebrew slave, upon the soldiers with wine and supplies at sunrise. For it should be known that Tanith had been quite ill all day. Consequently she had been compelled to lose her anticipated pleasures at the king's banquet. Now she was indemnifying herself by punishing her maid for some fancied omission of duty. The discipline of my lady Tanith was never lacking in shrewdness, and she had com-

manded Miriam to go into the camp without the protection of her veil.

So passed the night till morning came to reveal more clearly the squalid features of a military debauch. The heavy-lidded scribes, now mindful of slighted duty, were beginning to prepare their records ere their king's return. The guards were lagging wearily, yet with an appearance of decorum, before the royal tents and harem. A few seasoned veterans had driven the intruding camel from his resting-place, and were making a pretence of clearing away the litter about the five-spoked chariot-wheels. A half-hearted examination was being made of the impaled captives to see if they should be taken down. Here two befuddled bowmen were struggling to string a bow, their brains clouded by the impression that they must forage for their breakfast. And all over the camp were rueful groups, grumbling because they had exhausted their supplies — especially of liquids. Happier were they still asleep, in ignorance of their lack. But notwithstanding this general tone of weariness, there was one place, and that not far from the tent of Merodach, where laughter and jollity held full sway. It appeared that some rude wag had discovered Nebo, captain of the archers, asleep, stained

from head to foot with wine, and still embracing the skin which had held the entrancing liquor.

First the joker had shaken Nebo gently, then roughly, without waking him. Convinced of the safety of his prankishness, he had crowned the sodden drunkard with straw. Raising him to a sitting posture against a boulder, he placed a stick in Nebo's nerveless hand, — as a sceptre, — and called his comrades to salute "Nebo the divine, clad in his royal purple."

The jest was a sorry one, but, like heedless children, the soldiers fell in with its humour, and made obeisance as to a king. Not content with this, they caught the passers-by and compelled them to join in the sport.

Merodach heard the uproar and looked from his tent to learn its cause. It may be that his careless complacency was because it was Nebo who was being mocked, as he had no patience with the archer's coarseness. At all events he went back to his couch, saying nothing.

By this time slaves from the richer merchants began to appear in that portion of the camp nearest the city, bearing supplies, or driving beasts of burden heavily laden for the soldiers' use. Unfortunately the cavalry were on the outskirts, and the jokers discovered that they were likely to see others

eating and drinking while they went hungry. Convoy after convoy was intercepted and unloaded before getting half-way to them. Their joy was correspondingly enhanced by the sudden appearance of ten asses, bearing wine and food, driven by two men under the charge of a maiden.

The beasts were quickly unloaded, and the riotous soldiers led the shrinking girl to receive the thanks of their "king." Too much interested in their play to notice that the captain was half-awake, they placed her before him, and bade her do homage or suffer the direful consequences of her rebellion.

Startled and bewildered by this unexpected return for her courtesy, Miriam strove vainly to escape from her boisterous captors.

"Hail him king!" cried one.

"Impale her!" shouted another. "Bow, you stubborn one, — or die!"

Then all fell silent and began to shuffle backward from her, for Nebo was on his feet, staring sullenly at them. They were caught red-handed, and they feared his rage.

But Nebo's little wine-inflamed eyes saw nothing but the beauty of the unveiled face before him. "Come," he said, and, grasping her hands, he roughly pulled her toward the nearest tent.

"I am here as your friend; we have brought food for your men," replied the maiden, bravely. "Surely you will not harm a friend."

"You are mine, — come!" growled Nebo, and his prisoner knew that he had no thought of mercy.

"Will no one help me?" she cried, looking from one to another about her, while struggling to escape. But they only averted their eyes, or gazed covetously at her beauty. Then she tried to snatch a weapon from one of them, but Nebo foiled her, and bruised her with the tightness of his clasp. For an instant she lost herself, panting and crying piteously. But quickly she regained her self-control and said, proudly:

"If you will not let me go, my God will avenge me."

Her obstinate courage increased Nebo's rage, so that he shook her in drunken ferocity. Fairly dragging her to the tent, he threw open its flap and found himself face to face with Merodach, the Babylonian.

"Greetings, Nebo; but why are you so early at my tent? and why have you brought this maiden with you?" asked Merodach, so softly and with so pleasant a smile that those knowing him drew nearer, like vultures scenting blood.

The archer cursed savagely and attempted to

thrust Merodach to one side in order to pass into the tent. But, receiving a buffet which sent him reeling backward, he drew his sword and rushed blindly forward, still dragging his captive. There was a flash of steel, a groan, and Nebo fell fainting to the earth, his severed hand still clutching its sword.

"Take him to yonder forge and stop the blood by fire," commanded Merodach to the now sobered and obedient soldiers.

"Our men are rude and boisterous," he apologized to the grateful girl. "They did not wish really to harm you. We thank you for your gifts." Then very gently: "Should you come here again, it were well to remember that a maiden should not visit an army without wearing her veil."

Unnerved by her startling experience, as well as confused by his advice, she could only thank him in broken phrases for his kindness. She could not tell him why she was without her veil, she could only stammer,—what she hardly knew. Her beasts were already unloaded and she wished to go away, but she felt that she was miserably failing to express her gratitude.

There was also an unaccountable tumult in the mind of the Assyrian captain. Merodach had passed most of his life among men, but he was not alto-

gether without knowledge of women. His duties in the army had included a winter in the city of Asshur as captain of the king's guard, and his manly beauty had not lacked appreciation. But the bold admiration of court beauties had seemed quite different from the shy gratitude of this stranger. He felt annoyed at his difficulty to do more than direct his men to aid her servants. Truly she must think him boorish in his awkward silence. So, as neither could help the other in words, they walked silently together toward the end of the camp.

At last they paused before parting, and, as is so often true, the girl was first able to speak.

"I would not have you think unkindly of me," she said, softly. "You have saved me from a great danger, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I did not wish to come, but — may the God of my fathers watch over you and keep you. And — and it would be kind of you to tell me the name of my preserver. You were the only one willing to save me."

"I am called Merodach, the Babylonian. Will you also tell me your name?"

"Thy servant is no more than Miriam, the Hebrew slave of Esmun of Tyre, and of Tanith, his daughter. Kindness is sweet in the heart of a slave."

Again silence held them, though they were both wishful to say more, until Miriam signalled to her men to continue the march homeward. Then, bowing low before the Assyrian, she left him.

Yet it was not long before she was impelled to turn and take one last look at Merodach. He was standing motionless, his head bowed as if in meditation, and she was glad to be able to gaze at him unobserved.

He was tall, a hand's-breadth taller than the average man. Yet the perfection of his form relieved his height and graced it with martial stateliness. Her woman's eye dwelt lovingly upon the richness of his garb and armour. The light from his silver helmet dazzled her, and the silver scales on his arms and breast seemed to sparkle like rippling water. His cross-belts were of immaculate neatness, and the metal on his scabbard appeared molten gold. Before this she had noticed the almost foppish nicety of his curled and scented beard, and the fineness of his linen; yet she had not till now fully appreciated the splendour of his appearance. It was marvellous to know that he had helped her. It might be that he had mocked her, — that he was even the king himself.

Then she forgot his external adornment in the sudden warmth that thrilled her when she discov-

ered that he was returning her gaze. She was startled to be caught watching him, yet she would not have lost this proof of his interest in her. Nor did Merodach ever forget the long gaze which held them both in troubled bewilderment.

CHAPTER II.

THE HAND OF NEBO

As in every other army, since men began first to organize for war and battles, there were certain veterans in the Assyrian Horse who resented improvement or innovations in drill. They had ridden to battle all their lives with their knees high up on their horses' withers. They had also been accustomed to use their bows as their chief weapons. Yet was this young lord upsetting all precedents with his commands that they should lower their knees, and learn to strike and thrust with the sword. To these useless ends they were being unmercifully drilled, in season and out. And especially that matter of drill was a most unbearable grievance; even while they were wiping their beards and lips, and while the wines of Phœnicia were still tickling their palates, my lord Merodach had called them to drill. So, like reluctant dogs from a toothsome bone, they went snarling to their duties.

Some two hours later, Merodach was still busy exercising his squadrons in battle formations.

"Carry your knees lower!" he sternly cautioned some of the most rebellious. "Still lower! You cannot strike hard while your knees hug your horses' withers. Close up! Close up! Give your charge weight by massing together," and he sent them rushing down the firm sands over and over again. "That is better, much better," he cried, heartily. "What if your legs do grind together! keep them low. Nothing can stop you when you are welded into one." Twice more he urged them to the charge, then bidding them rest, he discovered a messenger from the king, demanding his attention. Dismissing his command, he made obeisance before the royal seal.

"To Merodach, chief of horse, from my lord the king; the word of his mouth," droned the messenger. A scribe was quickly found, the formalities of delivering and receiving the earthen tablet were observed, and the message was read aloud as follows:

"From Asshur-ab-aram, king by the grace of the great gods Asshur, Bel, Nebo, Tashnit, Ishtar of Nineveh, and Ishtar of Arbela, protectors of royalty;

"To Merodach, my chief of horse, greeting.

May an hundred years of life be granted to Mero-dach, my servant, before my face.

“For be it known that on this 24th day of the month Air in the fifth year of my reign, I have appointed Merodach, called the Babylonian, to be Turtan of the Left, and to be governor of the Khatti (Hittites). Also be it known that I have herein commanded my servant Merodach to place Nebo, the archer, in charge of my camp; and that Mero-dach, the Turtan, shall hasten to enter my presence here on board the ship of Hiram, my friend, king of the Sidonians.”

A strange smile passed over the newly promoted officer's face while he listened to this evidence of royal favour. Only one man, the Turtan of the Right, now stood between him and the king in command of the army. Conscious as he was of the new humility in the scribe (who cast himself on the ground, beseeching his favour), Merodach was nevertheless tempted to flout his unexpected good fortune. But, upon second thought, he made rich presents to both scribe and messenger, and dismissed them. The scribe departed to prepare the tablet, by baking, for the archives, and the messenger to his post by the king. Merodach himself went in search of Nebo to notify him of his charge.

News of his advancement had already reached

his men, who crowded around him with shouts of joy. The genuineness of their pleasure won his face to softness as he thanked them for their loyalty. Bidding them be worthy of his training, to make their past as nothing beside their future, he passed between their now silent ranks to Nebo's tent.

He found the latter sullenly nursing his wrist, now seared and bandaged in soothing oils. His countenance was downcast, and his muttered acceptance of his new duties was in the manner of one wishing but not daring to be insolent.

Not long, and Merodach had ridden through the streets of the ancient city to the wharves which lined the narrow arm of the sea separating it from its island part. There he saw the royal barge and its famous rowers from Arvad, the home of oarsmen. He gave his horse, Nergal, in charge of a soldier who had accompanied him for that purpose, and stepped on board. The barge sped to the wharf before the arsenal, at the northern end of the island, and he landed just in time to join the two sovereigns in their procession over the purple-carpeted gangway to Hiram's ship of state.

Asshur-ab-aram, tired and worn by his dissipation of the night before, smiled heavily upon him. He took his new place in rear of the Turtan of the

Right, who was ranged by the side of the chief eunuch and behind the eunuch who bore the parasol.

Crowds of shouting sailors thronged the maze of vessels in the harbour. Big-bellied merchantmen of Utica and Tarshish, keen-snouted biremes, pleasure barges, and even the humble boats of the watermen were decked with sails and streamers of purple and violet and amethystine hues. Behind them rose the palaces, tier on tier of massive stone and fragrant cedar, their roofs crowded with people. By the lofty portico of the new temple stood marshalled ranks of white-robed priests, — priests of Baal Melkarth, priests of Ashtoreth, and the high priest himself. The smoke of the altars rose straight upward from the temple court, and the swinging censers filled the sluggish air with the fumes of frankincense and myrrh. But like a foul undercurrent flowed the odour from the heaps of rotting shells of the purple murex-fish.

Hiram led his guests over his exquisite ship. Sheathings of gold and of shining bronze covered its planks from Lebanon. Its rowers were picked men from Arvad; their benches were of boxwood inlaid with ivory. Its sails and awnings were of finest, heaviest linen of that peculiar purple which glows crimson in the sunlight. Ebony pins held

the oars; the step of the mast was of pure gold and the anchors of silver. There, also, stood a band of the king's body-guard, full-bodied, stately men of Gebal, resplendent in golden helmets and armour, and purple linen cloaks. The skin of a great black bear, slain in Tarshish, was under the throne of the Assyrian king, and the yellow fur of a Libyan lion was spread for Hiram's feet.

Merodach was dazzled by the glow of colour on sea and land, and by the lavish display of precious metals. The shouts of the multitude thrilled him, and he was surprised and awed by the youth and regal bearing of the Sidonian king. Yet, despite his emotion, so keen were his glances and quick to comprehend, and so gallant was his appearance, that Hiram singled him out and showed him marked attention. He called his notice to the hold, and the compactness of its lading; he explained the use of the mallet which timed the rowers, and of the table upon which it was struck.

When the wharves and the city were far behind them, Hiram placed the Assyrian king before the table, and Asshur-ab-aram beat time loudly, and imagined himself king of seamen, monarch of the Sea of the Rising Sun.

The fresh air of the sea blew saltily in their nostrils, and drummed on the purple sail bellying above

them, and droned musically through the purple rigging. Schools of porpoises tumbled and played about the vessel, and the notes of trumpets pealed joyfully over the sunny water.

One of the crew hooked a shark, about noon, and the Assyrian king rivalled his mighty predecessor, Tiglath-Pileser, by pulling lustily on the line which drew it aboard. Eight feet long was the fish, and furious to escape. Asshur-ab-aram forgot his dignity and shouted his approval when Merodach killed it with a spear.

Perchance there may have been a touch of resentment on Hiram's part in what followed, for he must have been able to forecast the result. At all events, after a sumptuous luncheon, — which might better be termed a dinner, — he caused the ship to cruise quietly along the coast, and then bore fairly out to sea. The shores and headlands melted to a violet haze, the wind and waves rose higher, and his landsmen-guests grew very quiet. The chief eunuch clutched dismally at his monarch's throne and turned a sickly green. The Turtan of the Right lay heavily against Merodach, Turtan of the Left, and their king did not think to call them to an account; for Asshur-ab-aram had begun to loathe the sea. Indeed, the demons of seasickness overcame the Assyrians and created such inward commotion as to

make them hang limply against the bulwarks, crying — when they could: “Hilkah! Hilkah! Besha! Besha!” (Go away! Go away! Evil one! Evil one!) Broad grins covered the faces of the sailors and the rowers, who had long grown tired of the airs of the foolish landsmen. Hiram himself relished the scene, but he hid his enjoyment, and turned to Merodach, who was still fresh-looking and cheerful.

“Surely you have before this sailed on ships,” he said, with an admiring glance.

“But little, my lord the king, and that only in my youth.”

“Then this is not the first time you have been on this sea?”

“It is truly my first visit here. When a boy I was for a brief time a sailor on one of the vessels which sailed from Ur of the Chaldees.”

Something in the Assyrian’s manner caused the king to change the subject, and, after a few more words, go to condole with his brother monarch.

But, unfortunately, this immunity from seasickness bid fair to work Merodach very much ill. Asshur-ab-aram saw how this one of his subjects escaped the nausea which he, the king, had suffered, and, forthwith, he began to remember that he had never liked this Commander of the Left. Nor did

he have to send for his chief scribe to remind him of an incident which, on the contrary, still rankled in his memory. Indeed, he had not considered it wise to have that adventure recorded at all. He had been hunting among the reeds of a marshy river, and was returning to his camp. Some little thing had happened to separate him from his huntsmen and beaters, and he was waiting alone in his chariot when a wounded lion attacked him. And then Merodach had saved his life.

Assyrian law made it death for a subject to place himself between the king and his quarry. But Merodach had slain the lion with his sword, and Asshur-ab-aram had been well content to accept the merit of the deed. Yet he never forgot the sneer which had curled his captain's lips when he had not corrected the report of his own bravery. The very silence of Merodach was a bitter reproach to him, and the king hated him ever afterward. Now, as an evil fate would have it, Merodach was again victor when he was the vanquished, and his hatred became still deeper.

But a kindlier fortune was even then preparing a vent for this gathering bitterness. They were boarded by a messenger from the camp just before they reached the wharf. Asshur-ab-aram sat on his throne, leaning toward the eunuch who fanned

him. The chief eunuch received the earthen tablet, spoke to the king, then gave it to the chief scribe, commanding him to read it aloud.

"Salutation to the king, my lord," it ran. "May Asshur, Nergal, Bel, Zarpanit, Nebo, Tashnit, Ish-tar of Arbela, the great gods, protectors of royalty, give countless years to the king, my lord, and slaves and wives in great number to the king, my lord.

"I, Nebo the archer, have received of Mero-dach the Babylonian, now Turtan of the Left, my fellow servant of the king, my lord, a most grievous hurt. My right hand has been severed from its wrist, and I am therefore now unable to serve the king, my lord. I am become an useless thing because of the inexcusable violence of Merodach, the Babylonian. Most humbly do I now cast myself before the king, my lord, and beg of him justice and a hearing."

Nothing could have given the king more pleasure than this unhopèd-for opportunity. He rejoiced that Merodach had placed himself in the wrong, yet he was also furious when he thought of Nebo's loss.

"Stand forth, Merodach, thou Babylonian dog," he savagely commanded. "Is it true that thou hast maimed the best archer in all mine army?"

"It is true, my lord."

“Write it down even as he said it,” exclaimed the king to his scribe. Then more fiercely: “And who art thou thus willing to dare my vengeance? Did I not lift thee from the ranks and show thee favour? Thy bearing is insolent. It may be that I have not known thee. Tell me who thou art, that thy name may be written properly with thine offence, before I bid them seize thee by thy girdle.”

“Write my answer fully as I give it,” said Mero-dach, proudly. “Write that I, Merodach, called the Babylonian, am Merodach-Pileser, the son of Shamus Vul, once King of Assyria, where now sits Asshur-ab-aram, the usurper. Write that my father was brother of Asshur-bil-Kala; that they two were the sons of Tiglath-Pileser, the son of Asshur-ris-elim, whose father was Mutaggil Nebo, the son of Asshur-dayan, whose father was Nin-pala-zara, the great founder of our line. Now tell me: Whose son art thou, Asshur-ab-aram?”

At first it seemed as if the Assyrian king could not reply. Face to face with the grandson of Tiglath-Pileser, he was almost ready to see his subjects pluck him from the throne. But they were all his creatures; his good fortune was theirs, so he shrieked out his fear and rage.

“You lie! You lie! you whelp of Babylon!”

Then turning to the affrighted scribe, he snarled: "What hast thou written?"

Slowly and haltingly his dazed servant read the long list of names.

"Cast it into the sea!" howled the king. The order was obeyed. A bitter smile made the king's face more terrible than had his rage. "Tell me," he asked, "is it not thy duty to preserve thy records?"

"It is, my lord the king."

"Yet thou art here, and thy records are there. Surely thou must save them and see that they reach my royal city in safety. To thy duty, O scribe!"

The chief scribe gazed imploringly at the king, who only smiled, and looked toward the sea. Almost crawling from his seat, he prostrated himself in homage, and leaped clumsily over the bulwarks.

Asshur-ab-aram lazily left his throne, and stood watching until the arms and head of the drowning man came in sight. There were a few wild struggles, a choking cry, and all was over. Then the king glanced at Merodach and appeared surprised at seeing him in the ship.

"Is it possible that thou art still there, thou son of kings? Behold, the records of thy greatness are still unsaved. Save them, and I will forgive thee, Merodach."

There was no chance to mistake the meaning of the king. Merodach knew that he must die in the ship, or leap into the water after the scribe.

Glancing quickly about him, at the dark face of the now triumphant king, the quiet figure of Hiram, and the great city in the distance, he sprang on top of the narrow bulwark and dove straight into the sea.

Once more Asshur-ab-aram rose to view the sight of a drowning subject. But the ripples widened, the water became again smooth, and he never more beheld the face of Merodach.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE HUT OF HADAD AND CHNA

Now while all the Assyrians on board the ship were satisfied that Merodach was drowned, Hiram and all his men were sure of the very reverse. The Phoenician sailors and their sailor king were certain that one who had cleft the water as skilfully as any diver would pass under the ship, and try to escape by swimming to the shore.

So while Asshur-ab-aram and his following gazed carefully to see Merodach struggle and drown, as had the scribe, Hiram and the sailors kept silence and watched toward the other side, in the expectation of witnessing a cunning escape. Nor were these last disappointed; for their keen eyes discovered Merodach the instant he rose for breath. They saw him dive and rise again and again, until the distance finally hid him. And they mocked inwardly at their land-bred guests, and held their peace.

Nevertheless it was a long, wearisome swim, and

Merodach well-nigh perished of exhaustion before he was rescued by two men in a rowboat. In fact, he was peacefully allowing himself to sink, while the two watermen disputed concerning the wisdom of giving him succour. The green, rumbling veil of water had fallen upon him. He knew no more till he was returned to consciousness in the poor hut of his rude preservers. Moreover, he was soldier and philosopher enough to be able to appreciate the justice of their logic, that an Assyrian was fortunate in escaping naked from the sea. So Merodach stayed awake long enough to satisfy himself that he was alive, to discover the two watermen wrangling and cursing over the distribution of his entire belongings, and to enjoy the pleasure of drifting off into sleep.

The owners of the hut were away, and the sun was well up in the sky when he awoke and lay for some minutes on his couch of mangy skins, recalling the incidents which had made him an outcast in a strange land. In many ways this was the most complete demolishment of the structure of his desires that had hitherto hindered his purposeful yet checkered career. Disappointments and obstacles had been plentiful in his past, but had never daunted him. So even now, when all was seemingly lost, he thanked his gods for saving him naked from his

peril. Soon hunger took the place of meditation. He bound one of the skins about his waist, and searched the hut till he found some cakes of millet and a skin of wine.

Later the watermen returned for their noontime luncheon. They owned a boat, and carried water from the mainland to the islands. Chna, the elder of the two, was a grizzled veteran of unknown age and countless experiences. The storms and sun of every sea then known had changed his skin to wrinkled parchment. His hair and beard were tossed and tangled and coarsened by salty spray and wintry blasts. Lean, active, seasoned, gray, he seemed old as time; an immortal of the deep.

As is so often the case, his companion Hadad was his opposite. Many counted the young waterman the strongest and handsomest man in Tyre — if not in Sidonia. A few declared that Zagros, the Nubian slave of Tanith, the daughter of Prince Esmun, was stronger than he, but they were in the minority. Still more asserted that the beauty of Hector, the Greek, was more subtle and finished than Hadad's massive form or boyish, dissipated face could ever hope to be. But all united in the verdict that Hadad had been most lavishly gifted with both strength and comeliness. There was also a certain mystery attached to this younger of the

Assyrian's preservers. It was known that Hadad had come there from Damascus. Rumour said that he was of good family. There were moments when his manner and conversation gave hint of education and a past above his present condition. Yet, whatever his past had been, he was Chna's partner now, and he had well earned his reputation for reckless debauchery.

Hadad accepted the Assyrian's thanks with careless laughter, while Chna grumbled and cursed at the shiftlessness of a man so lacking in the swimmer's art. He growled all during the meal; he was cross-grained and crabbed beyond description, but, before he left, he tossed a shirt at the Assyrian's feet, and cursed him for his nakedness. Somehow Merodach had a sensation of friendship for the surly veteran, and he determined to win his favour.

Alone and among strangers, his indomitable brain was already beginning to outline plans that would make his new surroundings factors in his ultimate success. He had before this met and won men of the most opposite characteristics, and that night he dug his first trenches in his siege of Chna's heart. This hut of the water-carriers was the only refuge he could keep; he would prevent its owners from the wish to be rid of his presence.

Chna was old and garrulous. The wily Assyrian ignored his grumblings, endured his cursings, tried him here, and tempted him there, and in the end got the veteran launched on the limitless ocean of reminiscences.

Old! If one-half of what Chna told as having happened to himself were true, he must have been old indeed. Before the Greeks had commenced to struggle for the wealth of the northern coasts, Chna had sailed as merchant, discoverer, or pirate, as the opportunity might appear. He had been to Cholchis, where the miners caught the golden sands of the rivers on sheep-skins; like Jason, he had stolen the Golden Fleece. Once he had spent weeks among the Chalybes, and seen the red light of their forges on their naked breasts, while they beat out sword and dagger of steel, chanting incantations while they worked. He knew the secret of how they tempered their blades, burying them in the earth till they were fit to cut through metal helm and shield of bronze. The old man's deep-set eyes glittered as he narrated incidents of voyages among the Grecian isles. He told how his comrades would place their merchandise on the beach, and then return to the vessels and wait while the timid natives selected what took their fancy. They, in their turn, would withdraw, and the Phœ-

nicians, gathering together the articles unsold, and the gold left for the things taken, would repeat their landings until they were ready for the homeward voyage. But such scenes were tame compared with the excitement of decoying youths and maidens into the ship, to be kept and sold as slaves. Prince Esmun had in such manner obtained Hector, but had since freed him and made him his secretary.

Merodach also heard of Stromboli, and of its warning smoke. Chna said that a storm was sure to come when the smoke drooped low toward the sea. The great Cabirim — the mariners' gods — used it to warn the sailors to take in sail and seek a harbour. But of all his tales, Chna told none so interesting, Merodach thought, as that of his last voyage for tin. They had beat their course to Utica, from thence to the mouth of the river (now called the Rhone), and had from there gone inland nearly to its source. They had climbed the mountains to the temple of Melkarth, their regular resting-place. Caravans of the precious metal, from some unknown land in the distant west, came up a river (the Seine) and met the Phœnicians at the temple. But the natives had begun to prevent the passage of the metal through their country, and Chna and his party had been compelled to fight their

way back, every step. Yet they had saved the tin, — as had not always happened since.

Now Hadad was never easy when others did the talking; he, too, had stories to tell, of the sirens and their songs. He was not quite sure that he had seen them, but he had heard them sing, and he had longed to go to them. It was true that they brought sure destruction on those who went to them. No, he had not seen the sirens, but he had seen the maidens of Gebal loosen their hair, and beat their breasts, and lament over the death of Adonis. Each year, when the summer was hot, they bewailed his death by the river of his name, and each year the river had been reddened with his blood. Hadad had seen the water turn to blood with his own eyes; and truly the women of Gebal were surpassingly beautiful while they mourned.

Chna admitted that there was something impressive in the ceremony, but still it was nothing beside the interest of a genuine Feast of Expiation. Times were not as they once were, he complained; men were becoming too rich and selfish. When he was young, it was a common thing for the highest in the land to offer their first-born to Baal-Moloch in times of trouble. Then men were men indeed, and it was beautiful to see the women deck themselves and dance while the gods scorched up their chil-

dren. Now the rich offered their slaves, or bought the children of the poor and mocked the gods with their sacrifice. Yet the time must come when the people would compel the rich to give of their own. Everything had of late years gone well with Tyre; let Baal-Hamon burn up the land and cause a famine, — then surely the change would come. Chna then spoke of the dryness of that very spring; it might be that the famine was quite near at hand.

Both Hadad and Chna told of the pillars of Melkarth near the end of the world. Not far beyond them, to the west, was the sea of eternal night. Terrible spirits were there, guarding the place where the waters of the earth plunged hissing and headlong into space.

The glamour of their tales wove a spell about the Assyrian's heart. Merodach listened, and dreamed of the end of the world, of the sirens, and of the land of tin. The restless sea sang its song upon the beach, and its mystery grew into his heart, until he forgot home and people; forgot all save "the unharvested sea" stretching limitless before him.

Twice, during the two weeks of his stay with the water-carriers, he went into the streets of the island city and learned of the whereabouts of Esmun, the princely merchant. Once, while there, he heard

the tramp of soldiers. Hiding himself in a sheltered nook, he watched rank after rank of curled Assyrians pass so close that he might have touched the nearest. He craved to be with them, to speak to them, to return with them to the camp. In spite of their feastings and revellings, they were still altogether different from the fat, lazy guard of Hiram's court. With a leader like himself, they could conquer the world. It came to him like a certainty, that he had but to reappear among them and proclaim himself the grandson of Tiglath-Pileser, — they would rally to him to a man. More than that, it was as if sudden knowledge came to him of himself. The experiences of his life, the full meaning of their discipline and training, was clear to him, so that he became able to weigh correctly his own powers and strength and failings. The genius of command was his, the ability to mould and use an army, a nation, — and he knew it. And it seemed to him that he was placed face to face with one of the decisive moments of his life. He had learned that in every hard-fought battle there comes a pause, a moment, a crisis: that then is the time to strike the decisive blow. It was now that he must snatch the flying moment which held Assyria's crown.

He even sprang from his hiding-place to rally

these men to his standard; but he did not speak, he kept silence, and walked slowly, and as one who dreams, back to the hut of Hadad and Chna.

A few days later, he stood high up on one of the slopes of Lebanon to watch the army wind reluctantly on its homeward march. He was bidding good-bye to all that had been dearest in his past. There marched the skirmishers, the light-armed bowmen he had so often seen flitting here and there in the front of battle. There marched the archers of the line, accompanied each by his comrade, bearing the great wicker shield. Behind them rolled the war-chariots, seemingly innumerable. Then the royal standard, emblazoned with Asshur bending his bow; and the king himself, in tiara and fringed chasuble, shaded by his crimson parasol. Again innumerable chariots, — would they never end! The miserable ranks of captives followed, lagging through the dust raised by wheels and prancing horses. A horseman came into sight. Merodach leaned eagerly, breathlessly, forward, quivering like a dog in leash with the stag in view; before him were the standard and the horsemen of the Assyrian cavalry. They were his very own; there was nothing equal to this body of his own creation. How well they rode! They were cured

of clasping their knees high before them; they were centaurs, man and horse were one.

Tears filled his eyes and a great sob choked his breath; for they still needed him; they were as nothing without his guiding voice, — and he was leaving them. Never till now had Merodach, the Assyrian, known such grief.

But notwithstanding his grief, and despite the inner voice which prophesied that he was losing all in losing them, and in face of the promise that it was not yet too late, his stubborn will refused to yield.

He had determined to see Miriam again; he had vowed to see for himself the wonders of the deep, to sail the great sea. In one year, or it might be in two, he would return to the City of Asshur with Miriam. But, by Asshur, by Shammus, and Ishtar of Nineveh! he would not go back till this were done.

CHAPTER IV.

DAVID, THE SON OF JESSE

EARLY in the morning of the following day, Merodach started for the newer city. His course took him over the causeway, now almost completed. The aqueduct, which was to carry water from the fountain near the beach to the islands, was also nearly ready for use. Chna and Hadad, and the others of their vocation, would of necessity be compelled to seek other means of obtaining a livelihood. The Assyrian pitied the veteran, but could not but admire the solidity and massive perfection of Hiram's workmanship.

Hadad had told him that Prince Esmun was likely to be found in the neighbourhood of the "Egyptian Harbour," on the southern extremity of the island. The merchant was expecting grain from Egypt, and would probably be where he could see it arrive. But Esmun had already left, and Merodach was told that he was even then on his

way to his warehouses and wharves near the arsenal, clear across to the north. He had a fleet, sent out for tin, now some days overdue, and he was becoming anxious for its appearance.

A great mole, or breakwater, was under construction to complete this southern harbour. Merodach saw some huge rafts, from the quarries at Gebal, being unloaded, and he concluded to spend a little time watching the work. So he passed along under the shadow of the city's wall, through swarms of workmen and porters, and reached the unfinished part of the mole.

Hiram himself was there, superintending and marshalling his army of labourers. Nothing escaped his eye; none dared to loiter while the king was near. He seemed omnipresent, untiring, the embodiment of forceful genius. Furthermore, he had the kingly accomplishment of remembering names and faces, for he spoke to the Assyrian, half-smiling, and said:

"So you have not been drowned in our Tyrian sea, Merodach-Pileser, son of Assyrian kings. Your life among the Chaldeans was not altogether lost; for it enabled you to learn to dive and swim like any sailor in my fleets."

"I crave your pardon, my lord the king. Thy servant is as one dead; he is now no more than

Merodach, the friend of Hadad and Chna, the water-carriers."

The subtle simplicity of the speaker's words and expression tickled the king's fancy. He laughed, and retorted:

"And 'my lord the king' is at present no more than Hiram, the builder of causeways and harbours." Then sternly, yet with lowered voice, he asked: "Are you indeed no more than what you seem, — a loyal man and true?"

"I am, my lord, if it be loyal and true to give faithful service in return for simple trust."

The king gazed long and earnestly at the Assyrian. "You speak well," he said, quietly: "you speak as you fight, for your words are a shield to guard your thoughts. I will consider their meaning." Saying which, Hiram abruptly left him.

No sooner was Merodach alone than a stranger touched him on the arm. "Is that Hiram, the king?" he asked in a voice that moved his hearer as will half-remembered music. The Assyrian quickly turned, and could have cried out in his surprise. Before him was a young man of about his own age, — say of twenty-seven or twenty-eight, — a man sunburned, and with a silken, ruddy beard; truly a man, and seemingly accustomed to command; possibly, nay surely, one such as he,

— a soldier. Yet the stranger's voice was curiously like Miriam's; and he was as like Miriam as man could be to gentle maid.

"That is Hiram, the king," courteously; then hurriedly, "But who art thou?"

The stranger's ruddy face turned a deeper hue. His blue eyes flashed, and their pupils expanded as does a lion's when about to spring.

"Say, rather, who art thou?" he proudly replied, then sprang with Merodach, but before him, and threw himself fiercely against the Sidonian king. A huge rock had slipped and would have crushed the latter — as it crushed two of his labourers — had not the stranger's quickness hurled him to safety.

Together the stranger and Merodach raised Hiram, and explained their action by pointing to where he had been standing.

"I am for ever in your debt," he gravely said. "Thee I already know," to the Assyrian. "But who art thou?" to the stranger. "I would know thy name; for surely I have not seen thee before."

"I am David, the son of Jesse; an Hebrew. As a fugitive among the Philistines I heard of Hiram of Tyre, and I am come to speak with the king."

"I have heard some of my people speak of one called David, a man of valour, who defeated the

Philistines grievously; but surely thou art not he."

David glanced warily at the Assyrian, and hesitated a moment.

"Speak freely," said the king. "Both you and Merodach of Assyria are become my guests."

"I am that David. For two years, and more, I have been a fugitive in the land of Achish. I heard of thee, and one night I saw a vessel of Tyre driven on the coast below Joppa. When it departed, I came in it to have speech with thee. For art thou not Hiram of the Sidonians? And are the Sidonians yet forgetful of the wrong done them by the Philistines? Yet, now that I am here, and see the wealth and greatness of thy people,— behold, I am no more than an intruder; a youth before a mighty king."

"Nay, you are my friend. It is true that I am now engaged by work I may not neglect. Come to me at my palace, toward evening, and we shall eat together. Here is my ring; take it there when you will. You are my guest, and it will place my household at your disposal during my absence. I will listen to you as friend listens to friend."

"Not so, my lord. It is true that I have been granted the privilege of doing thee a service. Yet I am still a stranger. It is better that I prove my-

self in some other and more satisfactory way before I accept thy ring. Yet I will not refuse the honour of meeting thee at supper."

"Then at supper I will prove that my friendship is something more than pleasant words." The king then turned to Merodach and said:

"If it is your purpose to remain here, in Tyre, tell me plainly, and I will not fail to discover something worthy of the acceptance of the best soldier of Assyria."

"It were surely an honour to serve Hiram of Tyre in any capacity; but it may be that I shall learn of some place more needful of a soldier's skill. Yet I thank thee, and I will not fail to remember thy words."

Whereupon Merodach saluted the king and made his departure.

David was still waiting, and he and the Assyrian went together toward the north. Their recent adventure had served to remove all sense of strangeness from between them, and the latter was especially desirous of a better acquaintance.

Practically the city was new to them both. They strolled along the canal to the Great Square. They admired together the grandeur of the palaces, the bustle of the streets, and the energy of the people. By and by Merodach was led to describe the meth-

ods of Assyrian warfare, and David reciprocated by relating a thrilling experience on the hills of Judea. Becoming oblivious of their surroundings in a topic close to the hearts of both, they fell to discussing the best way to handle an army in battle.

"I have heard of the Assyrian chariots and their bowmen," said David. "And you say that you begin the battle with your light archers. Yet it seems to me that a line of slingers scattered here and there would most annoy the enemy, as well as serve to discover the point most open to my attack."

"I will look into the matter of slingers," said Merodach. "But after the battle is set, what can be better than a body of trained horsemen? Throw out your archers, or, as you suggest, your slingers; let them harass the foe into impatience and over-anxiety to strike. Then ply them with your archers of the line; charge them with your chariots, and annihilate them with your horse. Or, if the ground is favourable, strike them with your cavalry, supported by an advance of the whole line. It is worse than folly for a general to waste his strength in unsupported charges."

"I wish that you were with me to fight the Philistines. We have neither horsemen nor chariots; but there will be plenty of good, hard blows. But

have you noticed how the sun shines on the water? And see how sea and sky join one into the other. Surely that ship is like a great bird; and the fragrance of the hills is passing sweet."

"Wait a moment, and you will smell the stink of rotting shells and of the dye-vats. But what think you of the temple? These Sidonians claim that there is none like it in all the world."

David let nothing of the temple's beauty escape his regard. His eyes kindled, he seemed to change, to be lifted up by the thoughts it gave him.

"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork," he said, half to himself. "Is it true, Merodach, that all this beauty of workmanship is but to hold the stone these people worship?"

"I have heard," replied the other, "that they have their god in a holy place, hidden by that purple veil. They say it is in the likeness of a great emerald which fell to them from heaven."

"And this stone is housed in a temple of gold and cedar, is set as a jewel in a king's ring; but the god of my fathers is without a temple in all His earth. Have ye gods in Assyria, Merodach?"

"We have them as the sea has grains of sand. Our gods are innumerable; yet they are all as nothing to Asshur."

“ And do you, too, honour them, and build them temples? ”

“ We have no temple like this of Melkarth. Only the heavens can contain Asshur and our greatest gods,” said Merodach, proudly.

“ ‘ Only the heavens can contain,’ — that is a great thought.”

David bowed his head and stood awhile in silence. He had a vision of a great nation, a nation of Israelites, gathering year after year to worship God in a temple built by a king, none other than himself. He could almost hear the singing of the people, the clangour of the trumpets. He could almost see the thousands of white-robed priests, the smoke of the altars, the glory of the building. If God would let him free Israel from the Philistines, some day he would build a temple that should be the heart of the nation, the dwelling-place of the only living and true God.

Now all this time Merodach had been studying the personality of his new acquaintance. To say the least, he found the study a puzzling one. He could not decide whether David was more boy than man, or more man than boy. Now the frank impulsiveness of youth moved the Hebrew to unconsidered speech; but just as Merodach had begun to feel much older and wiser than his companion,

he was surprised by the conviction that he was with a man of great and powerful nature. It was as if he caught from time to time glimpses of hidden, passionate strength.

This uncertainty of analysis had so far prevented him from asking of David a certain question. The Assyrian could hide the workings of a scheming brain behind a mask of frankness. He felt that his companion might resent being questioned; and he was convinced that it would be a great mistake to be detected in anything of a crafty nature. Yet, after all, the question was unworthy of this inward discussion; there was no reason for delay in asking it. So he spoke with perfect openness.

“Do you know Miriam, one of your people, but now a slave in Tyre?”

“I am not aware that I know any in Tyre, save you and the king,” replied David, waking from a dream of what should be. “Why do you ask?”

“Because you startled me by your resemblance to Miriam. You speak and look so like her as to fill me with amazement. She has hair like yours, — like bronze in sunlight, — the same eyes and ruddy skin, except the sunburn. And her voice sounds in my ears when you speak softly.”

“No, Merodach, I have no knowledge of your

Miriam. Yet I must see her. Where may I find her?"

"She is the slave of Esmun, who is counted the richest prince in Tyre, and of his daughter Tanith, who is said to be the most beautiful woman in the world. But that is sailors' talk. She is as dark as I."

"And Miriam is fair," said David, slyly. "Now tell me of yourself, Merodach. I have thought that you spoke more freely of everything else than of yourself. Miriam, you say, is of my people. You are desirous of learning of her, should I know her. Therefore it is only right that I should know more of you."

"I am Merodach-Pileser of Assyria. A few days ago I offended my king. Now I am a fugitive in a strange country."

"Come with me and I will make you a commander of men. You shall be second only to myself." The fire left David's eyes; he paused an instant, then continued: "I, too, am a fugitive. Saul, king of the Hebrews, seeks my life. But I expect soon to help him drive the Philistines from our borders. Come with me. You are freed of service with your king. There is need of trained soldiers in Judea."

"I do not think that I shall accept your offer,

but I thank you for it. Will your way be mine, down to yonder wharves? ”

“ Not now, for I wish to speak to the dwarf over by the golden column. I will not keep you from doing what is in your mind. If I learn anything of Miriam worth your hearing, I will see you before I leave this place. May my God bless you in all you do.”

“ May Asshur keep you,” responded Merodach; and they kissed each other and parted.

CHAPTER V.

THE ASSYRIAN BESIEGES THE HOUSE OF ESMUN

It was a new experience for Merodach to find in his heart the conviction that, in some ways, another was greater than he. Yet somehow such was the truth, and, stranger still, the proud, self-sufficient chieftain did not resent the conviction. He even hesitated and thought of turning back to accept the offer just made him. But Miriam was not to be won in Palestine; and history was saved the necessity of recording Merodach instead of Joab as commander under David.

So, passing from the more quiet precincts near the temple, he reached the busier vicinity of the canal, where he stopped a few minutes to watch the work on a new building. There was no chiselling to be heard, no litter of broken stones to be seen. Each stone had been hewn to its proper dimensions before it was taken from the quarry. The edifice was being erected, as years later the men of Phœ-

nicia built Solomon's temple, without sound of hammer or of axe.

All about him was the rush and clamour of business. Streams of merchandise flowed along the street toward the warehouses. Here swayed a line of camels, just arrived from the Arabian desert, loaded with incense and laudanum, onyx and agate. There followed a caravan, from the port of Aden, with jewels, spices, ivory, and scented woods of India. Side by side, mixed among the camels, and the cause of endless profanity, staggered a throng of slaves, bearing bales of transparent muslin from Egypt, recently unloaded at the southern harbour. After them came more camels, carrying the corded cedar boxes of blue cloth from Assyria. Arabs from Kedar, Idumæans of Arabia Petræa, sailors, men of Damascus, Tarshish, Egypt, — the whole world seemed there, and its wealth and glory.

"By all the gods of Asshur!" muttered the Assyrian, too much impressed to appeal to individual divinities. "If Esmun is the richest merchant in Tyre, who can estimate his wealth?"

Just then he saw a beautiful face in the endless procession. And, possibly, because its owner was fair, and in command of a body of porters, he asked him if the street led to Esmun's warehouses.

"All streets lead to the warehouses of my lord,"

replied the Greek, for such he was. "If you wish to see my lord, and will come with me, you will presently be before him."

Merodach took him at his word, and forgot his personal interests for a time in his admiration of the form and features of Hector, the Greek. This captain of Assyrian fighters was no mean critic, and he swore to himself that he had never seen a more proper man than the one now before him. But Hector's connection with Esmun was more impressive than his personal attractions, and Merodach felt that it might do him no harm to win a friend employed by that merchant. So, plying here a question, and there a bit of subtle flattery, he soon had him convinced that there was no pleasanter man in Tyre than this Merodach of Assyria.

Thus engaged they passed through the crowded thoroughfare, and entered a spacious building packed full of merchandise. There Merodach was introduced to its princely proprietor.

At this place it should be understood that Merodach had negotiated a loan from his sailor friends, — so inspiring was the atmosphere of mercantile Tyre, — and he was consequently clad in what had been once his own raiment, now borrowed for this day only. He therefore presented an appearance befitting to one in "easy circumstances." Where-

fore the merchant was extremely gracious as he ushered him into a private room, making inquiry as to how he might serve his distinguished guest. First, would he take a taste of wine; Helbon's choicest vintage? And had he news from the east — or south? The merchant had been specially fortunate in his recent purchases; no one in Sidonia had so fine an assortment of weapons, and his stock of helmets and armour was simply unequalled. (Esmun had instantly settled that his visitor was an officer.) Nothing could give him more pleasure than to show him some swords, the best ever forged by the Chalybes; or would he prefer to step aboard the barge now ready at the wharf? It would take them but a moment to see a lot of horses just in from the desert. Two of them were worthy of royal owners; or —

“I am a stranger in your city, and I desire some office in your service,” interrupted Merodach, with winning assurance and ease.

A cold mask of reserve seemed to cover the merchant's smiles. His suave, enticing voice became brusque and indifferent.

“We are accustomed to select men for our service out of the families of our friends. You are evidently a stranger to business, or you would know that we select boys and train them into efficiency.”

"The custom is truly a wise one," agreed Merodach, with hearty admiration. "Yet I have set my mind on devoting my time and energies to the service of you alone."

"But I have no use for soldiers. We merchants are a peaceful folk, and, if I am not mistaken, you are one accustomed to command, to the use of sword and spear."

"I have indeed been a soldier; but man could not do better than to work for my lord Esmun of Tyre."

"Possibly not," assented the merchant, still more coldly. "It is not to my advantage to discuss the matter. Not only is it true that I have no place for soldiers, but for any one else as well."

"Far be it from me to attempt to argue on a matter which is altogether your own. There is, then, no place for me to-day. But to-morrow is soon here. Sudden emergencies spring up from day to day. To-morrow you might need me. Is it not the part of wisdom to make it so that I shall be with you to-morrow?"

Esmun frowned, but his face soon regained its expression of trained reserve, and he said:

"Will you be pleased to follow me?"

Whereupon Merodach was led through orderly passages, between piles of merchandise from every

part of the known world. His opinion was asked of this commodity and of that, till he wearied of trade exceedingly. Yet he always smiled, and replied: "Indeed, I know nothing of this." And each time the merchant showed great surprise, and said: "But you surely know of this?" till Mero-dach longed to destroy the words before they were uttered.

Through one room and another they went, till they reached what might be called the office or counting-room. Here he was shown papyrus rolls, inventories, bills of sale, invoices, orders. He was examined concerning his knowledge of picture-writing. He displayed his ignorance of the Phœnician alphabet, of its improvement over Egyptian, Assyrian, and every other system of writing. Esmun then began a lecture on the moneys of the world, showing how coin had come to take the place of broken bits of pottery, until now there was the one standard for business men, — silver of the standard of Carchemish. And Merodach continued to assert his ignorance until his throat was dry with thirst, and his brain was dizzy with repetition.

"Suppose we end this inquisition into my capabilities, my lord. You have learned only the one thing, that I know nothing, absolutely nothing of

business and trade; but I am altogether at your service."

"I cannot and will not have you in my employ. Let us end this profitless discussion with another taste of wine."

"I will not drink of your wine till I have been enrolled in your service," objected Merodach, sweetly.

"May your gods preserve you till then," exclaimed Esmun, piously.

"May Asshur keep you till I see you to-morrow;" and Merodach found himself out in the street, a defeated man — for that once. The look of smiling complacency left his face so soon as the merchant disappeared into his warehouse. "My skirmishers have been routed," he muttered. "But there are still my chariots and my horsemen to be put to flight. And if he shall take refuge in his citadel, I will advance my corps of sappers and miners."

Nor was his determined spirit weakened by the sight he gave himself of the vessels at the wharf. Some, travel-stained and weather-beaten, were unloading or being refitted for another voyage. Others were taking in cargoes, or were waiting while the dens of the city were being searched for their drunken crews. The scene was full of interest,

and Merodach spent the best part of the day watching it.

When it became time for the merchants to have thought of something besides business, he quitted his post and presented himself, the picture of cheerful readiness, before Esmun, who was just starting to keep an appointment with the king.

"Doubtless my lord Esmun has forgotten the stranger that visited him in the morning hours. And as it is possible that my lord has forgotten the reason of my appearance before him then, I have returned to assure my lord of my willingness to enter his service."

"'Tis again that smiling Assyrian," said the merchant to Hector, but loud enough for Merodach to hear. "Tell him that I have no need of him, that it is folly for him thus to weary me with his importunity."

But when the Greek approached to repeat his instructions, Merodach prevented him by saying, in a voice loud enough to reach Esmun, though with a most engaging smile for Hector:

"You will pardon my seeming rudeness, I trust; but you must know that I recognize no intermediary between your lord, the prince, and myself." Then speaking directly to the merchant, he continued: "I pray that my lord Esmun may not

consider me as lacking in diligence because of my present retirement; for certainly I will be here in the morning early to see him. May Asshur preserve my lord till then."

Whereat the Assyrian saluted and walked quickly away; nor did he pause until he reached the hut across the causeway. Hadad was absent, but Chna was cursing over a smoking fire, as he prepared the evening meal. The veteran did not so much as lift his head to return his greeting; he merely changed the object of his objurgations.

"Has the east wind entered your bowels, my father?" Merodach tenderly inquired.

"Baal-Zebub have thee, and fatten on thy carcass! Thy honied voice wearies me."

"Why are you so soon back? I have never known you to be home so early," said Merodach, beginning to take off his borrowed clothing. "Here are your garments,—unless you will let me have them again in the morning?" This last rather anxiously.

"And in the morning you'll curl your beard and perfume your locks till you're as sweet-smelling and as devilish as my lady Tanith herself," growled the seaman, as he took the tunic and threw it upon a dust-heap in the corner.

"It must be the east wind," said the other, sooth-

ingly. "Hilkah! Hilkah! Besha! Besha! and trouble no more my father," dusting the garment carefully and laying it on a cleaner place.

"The waterway is finished. The water is running to the city from the fountain. Our employment is gone — Stop that infernal smile, or by — by — by — I'll stop it for you!" stuttered Chna, too angry to find a fitting oath. "It's all the work of our gracious king, — may an evil one prey on his vitals! I, Chna, I, the seaman who was cradled in a storm and was suckled at the breasts of the billows, — I would not lift a finger to drive away the buzzards from picking his eyes. May the flies crawl over and devour him! I have lived for ages. I am an old worn-out dog, with broken teeth and bones to gnaw, — and the king removes my bones. And the rich, the merchants and the captains, lift their hands and shout, 'Oh, the wonderful king!' And the women turn up their eyes under their painted lids, and lisp, 'Oh, the wonderful king!' Oh, the dear king! the sweet king! the progressive king! I'm sick of the brat, and his progress!"

"But the king might —"

"By the clubs of the Eight Cabirim! you are still talking! When you're not smiling, you're talking. The gods gave you words in place of

wisdom, — yes; wear the tunic, you naked Assyrian, you — ”

“Peace, Chna,” commanded Merodach, but laying a caressing hand on the veteran’s shoulder.

“But what shall we do?” groaned he, becoming suddenly submissive. “How shall we now get us food, my son? We have made you welcome; we have not begrudged you food and shelter. How can we point to the door and say, Depart, we are become beggars, we cannot have you with us?”

“Think not of me, old friend,” cried Merodach, moved by the look in the old man’s face. “The sun rises out of the blackest night.”

“So do the storm-clouds,” retorted Chna, but soothed in spite of himself.

At this moment Hadad entered the hut like a whirlwind.

“Turn your barley broth out into the fire!” he gaily cried. “I’m yet two parts sober, but, by the silver horns of Ashtoreth! ’twill not be for long. Rinse out the cups, old man; here’s a full skin of wine. And here’s to Hiram, our gracious king!”

“You are late, Hadad,” laughed Merodach. “Your tempestuous partner has but this instant finished cursing the king. But I am peaceful and curious. Why shall we honour the king?”

“Tell that old grumbler Chna that the water

now runs through the aqueduct, and that our occupation is gone."

Chna cursed the aqueduct for carrying the water, and Hadad for carrying the news.

"Tell him that the new temple is now almost completed."

Chna cursed the new temple, the king who ordered its construction, the architect who planned it, and the builders who erected it. For more than a thousand years the old temple had served to please the god of Tyre. What need had they of a new one?

"Tell the pitiful old wretch that Hiram, the dwarf, will soon have finished the most wonderful image of Baal-Moloch the world has ever seen. I've been to see the wenches —"

"You're drunk, Hadad," interrupted Chna, but drawing nearer while he spoke.

"Only two-thirds drunk; I've saved the other third to finish with you to-night. The wenches declare that the king is only waiting the completion of the image to give us the grandest festival man has ever seen. He has invented one entirely new to celebrate the glory of his improvements. Already he has promises of enough children to keep Baal-Moloch scorching hot all night long."

"Children of slaves! Children of the poor!" cried Chna, scornfully.

"Yes, mostly," assented Hadad, in a regretful voice. "Mostly slaves; yet they claim that we'll have a few citizens who will offer their very own."

"Poor citizens!" sniffed Chna; "always the poor. But the day will come when Baal-Moloch will tire of such offerings. May I be spared to see it come," he ended, piously.

"And they say the priestesses are promising great things, — new tents, new booths, oceans of wine. The wenches say that Ashtoreth herself will be compelled to come to us that night. And there will be crowds from all up and down the coast; Sidonia's best and fairest."

"But you must have more to tell us of the king. Why should we drink to him?" asked Merodach.

"May Ashtoreth take him with her!" growled Chna.

"And doubtless she will," assented Hadad. "Now listen to the marrow of my story: I met the king to-day, and he said, 'Thou art Hadad, the water-carrier —'"

"Lies! Hadad, naught but lies!"

"I said, 'Yea, my lord the king —'"

"Lies! By the flies of Baal-Zebub! the truth is not in you."

“‘And doth thy partner, Chna, that best of seamen, yet live?’ inquired the king.”

“Sit down, Hadad; tell me that again, for my ears are getting old and slow of hearing. I may be mistaken. Did the king remember so well? Surely I was mistaken. Do you remember how I said, just a day or two ago, that there was the making of a good sailor in the young king?”

“Lies! naught but lies, Chna.”

“I tell you I did, Hadad. You sat there where the Assyrian now sits. You were belittling the king, and I rebuked you. It is true that he is quite young; but I said then, as I say now, that a few more years and a few more voyages will make our king the equal of any sailor on the coast.”

“Hear the gray-headed old reprobate lie! Now listen, you hypocritical old grumbler. I spoke to the king, or better, the king spoke to me, and promised this very day that every water-carrier shall be paid, by him, the value of his interests in business five times over.”

“I always declared there was none like our king,” exclaimed Chna, kicking over the broth, and seizing the wine-skin.

“And that is not all. The king declared, also, that water-carriers past the age of sixty shall from to-day receive a life-pension equal to the income

that carrier had till now received each year from his business."

"By the Seven Cabirim! who ever heard of such a king!" shouted Chna. "By the gold of Tarshish! my fortune is made. I will lie all day in the sun; I will buy a slave to do nothing but fan me of flies; I will eat four meals a day and grow fat with contentment. Oh, the most worthy young king! the generous king! Why are you still standing, Hadad? The time has come to be merry."

"Where now are all thy curses?"

"Curses? Not a curse has left my lips to-day. You were with me before he came; tell me, Merodach, my son, did I curse since you were here?"

"They had the sound of curses," said Merodach, softly. "But the day is hot, and it may be that I grew drowsy and dreamed you cursed."

"You were surely dreaming, my son. Behold, it is as I said. That tunic and those garments of thine are useless to me. Keep them all, my son."

CHAPTER VI.

THE STORY OF MIRIAM

TIGLATH - PILESER, like Nimrod, "the mighty hunter before the Lord," was a man of gigantic stature. Merodach remembered his grandfather well, and he often recalled the time when the old, old warrior had drawn him between his knees, and said:

"Son of my son, thou art now a heedless, forgetful child, but thou art from the loins of kings. And I, thy father's father, am very old. Yet because I am old, I have learned many things. I have learned that intemperance is not for kings who would conquer and rule. Conquer and rule thyself as thou wouldst an adjoining kingdom. The temperate king is as a god among the drunken; their secrets are his; their power is his. Even Asshur cannot prevent foolish words from a drunkard's lips, or foolish deeds in a drunkard's life.

"There are two leaks which let out greatness:

the love of strong wine, and the love of a woman who knows that she is beautiful.

“Son of my son, canst thou remember this wisdom which has been taught me by Asshur, and a life of many days and many triumphs?”

Then the old lion had dismissed him to the women, and was soon passed away. But his words had sunk deep into the heart of his grandson, and were never forgotten.

Thus it was that Merodach awoke clear-eyed and refreshed that following morning, while Hadad and Chna snored in sodden sleep after their revelry. As Chna had prophesied, he curled his beard, cleansed and perfumed himself, and went out again on his campaign against the house of Esmun.

As may be remembered, the merchant had not been charmed by the expectation of seeing him again. He was annoyed by the persistency Merodach had shown, and he commanded Hector not to admit him, but to say that his employer would be absent from the warehouse all that day. This would be quite untrue, as Esmun was too much worried by the non-appearance of his cargo of tin to be kept from watching for it daily.

Hector was sorry to be so commanded, having fallen an easy victim to the Assyrian's tongue. Yet no one could have doubted his sincerity when he

protested that Esmun would not be at the warehouse.

"Then I will place myself at your disposal, so that I may learn something of value to my lord Esmun, when he shall accept of my services," replied the calm Assyrian.

For at least once in his life, the Greek found himself lacking in invention. Nor was his anxiety lessened by the sight of Merodach eating his barley cake at the noon hour, when Esmun had promised to return. All through the morning Hector had been amazed by the adaptability and the iron persistency of his self-constituted pupil and tormentor. And he was doubly surprised by his calmness when they found themselves under the angry eyes of the prince.

"Did I not straitly forbid you to receive this man, under any circumstances?"

"Your command has been obeyed to the extent of falsehood," replied Merodach before Hector could frame an excuse. "Three times beyond a score Hector has assured me that you had no wish to see me; and three times beyond a score I have assured Hector of my purpose to remain here until your return. And he has always most stubbornly asserted that you would not be here to-day. There-

fore I am doubly glad to give you my greeting; for truly you are here."

"By Melkarth! I am surely here. Throw this Assyrian fool into the street!"

Several stout slaves were standing near the door of the office. Hector dropped his half-eaten luncheon to the floor, and would have summoned them, but Merodach stopped him with a look.

"There is no keener knife in all Tyre than this weapon in my girdle," said the latter, lowering his voice to prevent scandal. "I am, in a measure, alone and in your power. It is true that I may, in the end, be thrown into the street; but first I will slay my lord Esmun, and then so many of his slaves as Asshur may permit me."

"Leave me alone with this man, Hector." Then, after his command had been obeyed, the merchant continued: "My death would not further your desires. Why are you resolved to pester me beyond my patience?"

"I have no wish to suffer indignity at the hands of your slaves, nor to thwart my desire by means of your death. But the latter is preferable. I am one that could well serve a master of my own choosing, or fight relentlessly one that had caused me injury. I am a stranger in a strange land. I would connect myself with none but its greatest."

"There is then Hiram, the king."

"I count even the king beneath Esmun, the merchant."

"But what can you do for me? If it is true that I am the greatest in Tyre, I have right to none but the best of service."

"Whatever my lord may set me to do. The body requires food and raiment; provide it them, and I shall be satisfied with the wisdom which will direct its service. A great man cannot fail to select wisely; a successful commander never fails of using well a competent lieutenant."

"I have need of one to tend my fish-ponds, to clean my grounds, to do the work of a slave about one of my houses. There is never lack of food or raiment in my household; but the work is, as I said, the work of a slave."

"Whenever my lord Esmun says the word, I am ready to take up my new duties."

"But this is the purest folly. You are a man of authority; you were the best officer in the Assyrian host, for I know you, Merodach. It may even be possible that your quarrel with your king was acted for a part; that you were left here as a spy. It were then a crime for me to hire you in any capacity."

"There is truly nothing but enmity between me

and Asshur-ab-aram. I will pay you loyal service so long as I eat at your table and am clothed by your bounty."

"I may regret having ever met you, but I will try you for a season, Merodach. Hector, the Greek, will give you a writing of instructions for Miriam, my daughter's slave, and the head of my house where you shall be. Whatever Miriam tells you shall be as from me, or from my daughter, the lady Tanith. You are now become one of my household. If your obedience is as your persistence, there may be promotion even for one doing the work of a slave. Of a truth, your perseverance has been as commendable as your methods have been unusual."

"It may not be amiss for my lord Esmun to make inquiries of the king concerning my loyalty and truth. If the king has not forgotten his words of yesterday, he will speak well of me."

"Of Hiram? Why have you till now kept silent about your friendship with the king?"

"Because I had no wish to be accepted only for the sake of the king. A beautiful cup is no proof of the excellence of the wine."

The merchant fell into a reverie and was silent for many minutes. Finally he summoned his secretary, and had him prepare a roll of papyrus for

Miriam, and Merodach was sent to work under the authority of the woman he had saved from violence.

"Surely the gods of Assyria are greater than the gods of Sidonia," he said joyfully to himself, as he walked along the causeway to the mainland. "For the battle with the house of Esmun is already becoming a victory."

He found Chna sunning himself behind his hut. Thanking him for his kindness, he bade him and, through him, Hadad, farewell for a season. Afterward it was not long ere he was standing before Miriam.

"I have greeting for you, Miriam, and here is the writing which was given me for you by my lord Esmun."

"The lord Esmun is but a merchant of Tyre. What right has he to send you, the commander of Assyrian warriors, on his errands? Who is there but the King of Assyria worthy to command Merodach?"

"Nay, Miriam; I am now the lowliest servant in your employ. Read quickly the message I brought you — or send for a scribe — that you may understand your master's will, and that I may begin my work."

Miriam hastily unrolled the scroll, read it, and

stood gazing in inexpressible bewilderment at the grave face before her. Once more she read the scroll, utterly unable to comprehend that it could apply to the man who had brought it.

"It is undoubtedly the writing of Hector, Lord Esmun's secretary; and I am instructed by it to direct thy work. But O my lord Merodach! art thou not in a plot to make sport of me?"

"By Shammus and by Ishtar! no," exclaimed he, full of earnestness. "I have angered my king; I am a fugitive from his wrath. I have obtained service of your lord, and I am here to serve you faithfully, — for it is truly you only that I serve."

"But why are you here to serve me? You are one born to command; you are fitted to lead men. I am only a woman; how am I to tell you what to do?"

"What are the instructions of my lord?"

"That you are to attend to the fish-ponds, to care for the grounds."

"Under whose instructions? I have indeed commanded men, and I have always been careful to see that they obeyed the slightest command. Under whose instructions am I placed?"

"Under mine, but —"

"Then you must quickly direct me. There is

much to be done. Is not yonder a hoe, and near it a spade?"

"Yes, but —"

Merodach left her, picked up the hoe, and began to trim the overgrown edges of the path. "Doubtless my lord will inquire of you to-night how much the new gardener has done. I would not have you blush for the sloth of your servant."

Miriam blushed deeply at the look he gave her. She was troubled by his presence as a servant, but she was fascinated by the power of his great arms, the ease of his movements.

"You are very strong, Merodach, you are a lion in your strength," she said below her breath; then left him for fear of herself.

His fellow servants stared curiously at him when he joined them in the noontime meal. The restraint and daintiness of his eating annoyed them. But he controlled and curbed his pride, and made them feel that he was only their comrade in labour, until they lost their distrust and forgot their suspicions.

Often, during the morning, Miriam had peeped at him through the lattices, always to find him working as though his life depended on her approval. Thoughts of what might be fluttered her heart, and the blood was very warm in her veins.

Yet when she gave him directions for the afternoon, she could not meet his eye. Yet she rejoiced in her timidity, for she was glad to feel that he was still her lord.

About an hour later, Merodach heard voices, and saw David, the Hebrew, walking with Miriam toward him. They passed him, talking earnestly, while he bowed his head to escape recognition. He heard David say, "Hiram of the Sidonians gave me a writing to Esmun, and I have been given permission to come to you. I have been told that you are one of my people." They passed on and entered the summer-house near by, and their words failed longer to reach him.

Miriam was glad to hear the accents of her childhood's tongue. They filled her with sweet and bitter memories.

"My mother was captured by the Phœnicians," she said, when they were seated in the pleasant shade. "She was taken with me, for they killed my father. I was very young then; there was only a year between me and my sister Ruth, and she was just turned six."

"And where is your sister Ruth?" asked David, gazing curiously at this feminine counterpart of himself. "Merodach was surely right when he said that she was like me," he said to himself.

His question brought a look of anguish to Miriam's face. "Ruth was six and I was seven when we were playing by our house. We were some distance from the seashore; but a party of sailors had landed to find children, and they stole us. They brought us here and sold us to my lord Esmun. There was a famine in the land, and the rich were eagerly buying young children."

"That seems strange. Why should they encumber themselves with slaves as young as you? "

"Ah, my lord, you are truly a stranger in this fearful land. They offer their children in sacrifice to their god Moloch, when the sun has parched their fields. A great sacrifice had been declared, and some of the highest in Tyre had been called upon to propitiate Baal-Moloch by offering their first-born. None might escape the call when chosen by lot. But the rich bought, or secured, children to give instead of their own. My lord was so chosen. Ruth was dark of hair — just the size of his daughter Tanith — and Ruth — my little Ruth was burned to save the life of Tanith, my mistress. She was so gladsome a child, so lovable, — and I saw her in the monster's arms. O Ruth! my sister Ruth!"

Tears fell from David's eyes and ran down his cheeks for mingled wrath and pity. First he tried

to comfort Miriam; but his rage increased till he could not speak. Miriam caught his spirit, and their faces grew more strangely alike as fire answering flame.

"May our God confound them and destroy them, root and branch. I will see the king. I will demand vengeance. God do so to me, and more, if there be one of the house of Esmun left to see to-morrow's sun," cried David, sternly. "I will demand of Hiram your freedom. This night I will take you with me to your own kindred,—after I have brought vengeance on Esmun and Tanith."

That moment Miriam raised her eyes and saw Merodach still at work with his hoe. If she went with David, there would be an end of seeing him. The thought startled her; love drove out anger, and she said, timidly:

"My lord Esmun has been kind to me since then. He has seemed eager to make me forget the past; and I have learned to think kindly of him."

"But you would not stay here a slave?"

"Just for a little while," said Miriam, looking wistfully at Merodach. "A little later I may wish to accept your offer, but there are some things which—which make it seem better for me to remain a little longer in Tyre."

Also David on his part had begun to think. He was wrong to forget the affairs of his people in the sorrows of one. The time had not yet come for him to champion the afflicted, and he was relieved when Miriam refused his help. By and by he remembered what Merodach had said about his resemblance to Miriam.

“You alone have the right to decide whether to go or stay,” he said, wondering at her choice. “But after I am gone, should the time come when you need my help, let me know, and I will give you instant assistance. Now tell me of your kindred, so that I may make inquiries about them on my return.”

“I am of the tribe of Judah.”

“I, also, am of the tribe of Judah; and thy kindred?”

“My mother was Ruth, — I did not tell you that mother died of sorrow for our little Ruth. My mother was Ruth, the descendant of Boaz and of Ruth, the Moabitess.”

“As God liveth, thy mother was Ruth, the sister of Jesse; and Jesse is my father, and thou art my cousin, Miriam.”

“And can it be possible that you are that David, the son of Jesse, who slew the thousand — the tens of thousands of Philistines? Even here in Tyre

they sang of your mighty deeds; and when I heard them I rejoiced in my kinship with you. But I have always pictured you to myself as being great in stature, terrible to look upon. Yet you are slight and comely, — and how young you are!”

“Yet young as I am, I am older than Hiram, your great king.”

“And to think that you are my cousin,” cried Miriam, happily, yet with tear-dimmed eyes. At which David kissed her, and vowed again to remove her from that den of wickedness. And Miriam found it very difficult now to move him from his purpose, but she finally prevailed upon him.

“It would be no little matter for me to find for you a peaceful spot in all Palestine,” he admitted in the end. “And I am now a wanderer, for Saul, the king, is continually seeking my life.”

He told Miriam how Samuel had come to him in his youth, and had anointed him with the holy oil. He spoke of his battles, of the king’s dark moods, and of his days and nights in the hills, a fugitive from Saul’s wrath. When she asked him why he did not kill the king, he told her of the night in the cave, of his purpose to leave the outcome in the hands of God.

This strange meeting with an unknown relative

had unlocked the inner chambers of David's heart, and her quick sympathy impelled him to speak of his dreams and aspirations. He did not know how it was to come, but some day he was to be King of Israel. Some day he should drive the Philistines from his land, and there should be peace.

From this their communion glided into reminiscences, and he recalled his boyhood days, when he had kept his father's sheep. That was when the lion and the bear had taught him that God was with him. He also described the nights when he sat before the camp-fire, and dreamed beneath the stars. God had seemed nearer to him then than during these latter years of trial and disappointment. But God must be always the same, "and He will keep me," he said, "even as I tended the sheep. The Lord, He is my Shepherd."

Even as he spoke, the mystery of inspiration filled his heart. He forgot Miriam, his surroundings, everything but the thoughts which changed and beautified themselves till they became the soul of living words. Miriam never forgot the comfort and peace that seemed to rest within her as he said:

"The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want,"

and all her fears left her as he declared:

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.”

“Your words are as the shouts of victory after a terrible battle,” she said, a long time after David had finished. “Is God indeed so mindful of us? The gods of Sidonia are fearful and very cruel. Can a god be tender, as you were with your sheep? The heavens have seemed far off till now. You have given me strength to remain here alone; for it may be that the God of our fathers will keep me. You will surely come again to me before you leave. And perhaps you will even play to me on the harp, as you did before Saul, and drive away the evil spirit that is sometimes strong within me?”

“I will come again, and I will play to you on the harp. It has been pleasant to meet you, my cousin. May the God of Abraham protect thee until I may shield thee from harm.”

CHAPTER VII.

A VISIT FROM "MY LADY TANITH"

HECTOR, the Greek, ever affirmed that there was more work done at the warehouse when Tanith was there than at any other time. She was keener to detect carelessness than Esmun himself. He declared that she knew where everything was stored, that she could give an inventory of merchandise in the warehouses and on the way, and that she had the gift of selection. In fact he was accustomed to assert to Hiram, the dwarf, at least once in every week, that Tanith was the best merchant in Tyre, — therefore in the world. She had travelled with caravans over both the northern and the southern routes. Once she had been to Tarshish, twice to Egypt. Every one knew that the lord Esmun made it a practice to consult with her, that he confided in her, and considered his daughter as being second only to himself in business ability.

And once in every week Hiram, the dwarf, assented to these assertions, and took occasion to suggest, as commentary, that more men hated or loved Tanith than was true of any other woman in the world. He therefore deemed it an admirable thing for a thinking man to know such a woman. He was also given to the statement — which Hector always stoutly denied — that Tanith loved more men than did any other woman in the world; another most admirable thing for a thinking man to observe.

However, passing from the discussions of these two friends to their subject, it should be narrated that Esmun spoke to his daughter of Merodach and his irresistible persistency. He had even been frank to admit that he had entertained fears of sudden death until he had recollected that Miriam wanted a slave to take care of the grounds.

“But was not his acceptance of such labour in itself a suspicious thing?” asked Tanith, as they talked together in their island palace.

“That is the very question I asked myself, and hinted to him,” responded her father, watching her inscrutable face.

“Did he protest overmuch? or was his answer simple and straightforward?”

“So very straightforward as to make me believe

that there was something beneath his desire to work for me."

"The Assyrians are given to lying and treachery; 'treacherous as an Assyrian' is a common saying, and a true one. There must have been some reason besides fear which led you to employ such a man. I have never known you to do a careless act."

"Nor did I in this. He was ready to put his dagger at my throat, and I did not wish for death. Yet that was not my chief reason for hiring him. It seemed to me that I might profit by the services of one so set on obtaining his end. Should he prove obedient to my commands, his stubbornness will make him a valuable servant. Also, after he had attained his desire, he avouched acquaintance-ship with the king."

"And what said the king?"

"That he knew that Merodach had been one of the highest officers in the Assyrian army, that he had offended his king, and that he would appoint the Assyrian to an office in his royal household if I refused him aid. The king also said that Merodach had reason to believe in his willingness to help him before he applied to me. Then he laughed, and added, 'He is surely Merodach, the Assyrian.'"

"Possibly it might be the part of wisdom for

you to promote this Merodach to an office in one of our ships," said Tanith, broodingly. "We have lost many such in storms. A touch of a finger — in a storm — is a little thing. Yet he did not threaten you until you commanded your slaves to throw him out."

"I have thought of such a promotion, should he prove intractable. But first I desire to learn his reason for coming to me. It has been some time since you were last away from here. I have thought that Miriam might have need of you, — it may be to-morrow?"

"I had intended to see her the day after to-morrow," said Tanith, rising.

Her father smiled significantly, and they parted for the night.

In accordance with her father's wish, Tanith went to her house on the mainland at the time named, and began to catechize Miriam as to her doings since last they were together. As was her custom, she went all over the premises, changing and criticising till she inventoried and mastered the minutest details of the work begun and accomplished during her absence. In the shortest time possible she had impressed every servant and slave there with a sense of impending judgment. It is

needless to say that she immediately discerned the figure of the new gardener.

"It is hot, Miriam, and I have forgotten the cause of our last quarrel. You may sit here and fan me," she said, languidly. "Where got we this new gardener?"

The suddenness of the question, and the nature of her thoughts of Merodach, were enough to cause Miriam much inward emotion. But her hatred of Tanith was of so fine a quality as to enable her to answer:

"If my lady Tanith means Merodach, the Assyrian,—he was sent here by my lord Esmun some two or three days ago."

Tanith had not watched Miriam's face, but she was certain that her fan had neither faltered nor fluttered in its gentle play. For at least once in her life she had been completely deceived.

"Have you noticed aught between this Merodach and any of the maidens of the house?"

"He has seemingly thought only of his work, and of how it will be viewed by my lord Esmun, in the event of my lord's presence here."

"He must be a paragon of servants," said Tanith, scornfully. "I would see this model of excellence. Have him brought to me here."

At which Miriam's heart sank, for she was sure

that she now understood the reason of this unexpected visit. Until now she had been wondering why her mistress had put on her most beautiful garments. Fortunately she had been preserved from showing agitation when questioned about Merodach, and she prayed to the God of David to save him from Tanith's allurements; but her faith was not strong. Yet it was a goodly sight to see him towering above the fat eunuch who had brought him. And Miriam was proud of his grace and calmness.

"You are the Assyrian, Merodach, sent here by my father," began Tanith, examining him beneath drooping lids, as one might a horse or a piece of sculpture.

"I am Merodach of Assyria."

"I have been told that you were an officer in the Assyrian army."

"I was an officer in that army."

"What was your command?"

"First I was chief of horse; my last office was third only to that of the king."

"But now you are only concerned with feeding fishes and trimming walks —"

"And the right to the clothes I wear and the food I eat," interrupted Merodach, with quiet temerity.

Miriam could have fallen at his feet for love of his daring; and Tanith began to feel a languid interest in the personality of Merodach.

"Yet even now you have a friend in Hiram, the king. The friends of our king are clad in princely raiment and may fare sumptuously at his table."

"The king is pleased to consider himself in my debt because I was present when another saved his life. Better the humble generosity of the water-carriers who kept me till now; better the labour of a gardener here than the unearned favour of a king."

"Are you as true as you are proud, Merodach of Assyria?"

"Nay, my lady Tanith; I am ever proud, but there are times when I am not true."

"You are tall and strong of arm," said Tanith, letting her eyes pass over his figure with such a critical yet impersonal glance, as to make him feel himself an object for barter or sale. So while he restrained all outward sign of his irritation, it well-nigh brought death to the fat eunuch. Very likely the heat of the day, the closeness of the room, and the scent of Tanith's perfume of lilies were too much for the latter's power of endurance. The poor wretch had been standing without moving

hand or foot while they talked. Perhaps he had been deprived of his usual siesta, for he became fearfully drowsy, and Tanith caught him gaping.

"Smite him, Merodach; he wearies me with his sleepy yawnings," she said. And Merodach was glad to obey.

"Melkarth himself could not do better," she softly exclaimed, as in response to Miriam's gesture two slaves entered and bore out the senseless offender. "But can you leap from yonder window as readily, Merodach of Assyria?"

Merodach went to the window, carefully parted its amethystine drapery, and leaped without a word.

"Is the fellow killed?" asked Tanith of Miriam.

The latter went to the window, beheld Merodach lying at the foot of the hill down which he had rolled, and returned, saying, carelessly:

"He is killed, or stunned. It were better, perhaps, that he were killed."

"You speak in riddles; why better?"

"Because he has stood before you and failed to notice the surpassing beauty of your face, and the splendour of your raiment."

"I will give you this dress and will overlook your impertinence, if you will discover for me whether he is a true man, or the most perfect of liars."

"But if he be dead?"

"The lord Esmun will send you another in his place; one short and fat and free of guile." A curious opacity clouded Tanith's eyes. Miriam said nothing, for words ever failed her when she beheld her mistress enfolded in her impenetrable mantle of sombre brooding.

In a measure it was the salvation of the Jewess that she had from childhood been fascinated, while terrified, by the study of Tanith, her moods and her subtleties. So now she was most fortunate in having perception and quickness to thwart the purpose of the beguiling frankness of one never more dangerous than when she had won her hearer's confidence.

"I have misjudged you, Miriam. My slaves told me of your treatment at the hands of the Assyrian soldiery. I knew that one of their officers had rescued you from insult and violence. My father informed me that this Merodach had neglected the certainty of high office under the king, that he might secure the place of servant here. My suspicions were aroused. I said to myself, It is only one woman who can explain this mystery; and I came directly to you."

"Had you spoken plainly of this in the beginning, I should have told you that it was as you sus-

pected. I have no reason to deny that Merodach of Assyria saved my honour and my life."

"Truly, I have sorely misjudged you, Miriam. I am sorry that I did not speak frankly to you. And this Merodach did really save your life and your honour? How, then, can you see him in the plight he is now in, and not move so much as a finger to aid him?"

"May my God save you from such fear as I am now in!" cried Miriam, falling before her mistress, the picture of distress and consternation. "O my lady! I am afraid! afraid! I seem not to know what to do. My lord, your father, sent this man here to me, — and he is Merodach, my saviour. And now he is sorely wounded, — it may be dead, — and I dare not go to him. You commanded him to leap; you sent him to his death; and because I fear your wrath, — because I know your wrath, — my gratitude is destroyed by cowardice."

"Is my anger so terrible, Miriam?"

"It is as the burning of Baal-Hamon. I cannot endure it."

"Yet until now your self-control has been most admirable."

"I hoped to preserve it until you were gone."

But my fear is too great. I am a weak fool," said Miriam, hopelessly.

"And is it really true that your fear of my wrath is greater than your gratitude for the one who saved you?"

"The Assyrian shall die, if it be your will," cried Miriam, sullen and full of despair.

Again that sombre cloud darkened Tanith's eyes. She sat a long time, silent and absolutely motionless. Miriam knew that nothing could save her, should her mistress suspect that she cared for Merodach. She was certain that Tanith had come expressly to learn why he was there. He was in danger; they doubted his truth; he had done something to rouse their suspicions, and, for some reason, both he and herself would be lost if Tanith believed that they were lovers. She was sure that his only safety must lie in the possibility of Tanith's believing her selfish and cowardly enough to neglect him in his extremity. The stress of the moment had taught Miriam that she loved Merodach better than she loved herself. To save him she would lie or suffer death, if need be. She felt that she had shot her last bolt, that she must abide the result,—and who could penetrate the full purpose of that impassive face before her?

At last Tanith slowly rose to leave the room.

When she reached the doorway, she paused and laughed heartily, but as if to herself.

“If your cowardice will serve to keep you obedient and faithful, Miriam, you shall win more of me than the bravest warrior ever won from king with sword and spear. The dress is already yours, you little fool; but it were as well that you hasten and discover if the Assyrian is yet in the reach of help.” Tanith laughed again, saying to herself: “Verily, I did not think he would dare to leap. He is tall and stately as the cedars of Lebanon; his limbs are straight as Melkarth’s.” Then aloud: “It is my wish that he should live. Later you may tell me of his condition.”

“May the God of my cousin David be with him and me,” cried Miriam, divided by love and perplexity, so soon as she was alone. “May the God who forgave David, when he played the madman before Achish of Gath, forgive me for playing the coward with Tanith. My mistress has seen his beauty; she laughed because he pleased her. It is death to him and to me if it is true that he came here because of me — and she learn it. I have made myself vile to her, for one I hardly know. Yet he saved me from the brutal soldier. And Tanith knew all about it, and I was almost undone, until I learned of her knowledge. It may be that God has

already helped me, — surely He hath, if Merodach still lives."

Her life among the Phœnicians had almost obliterated the teachings of her childhood. Yet the instinct of race had made her respond, vaguely and ignorantly, it is true, to the touch of David's faith and spirituality. So, alternately praying to an almost unknown God, and communing with her hopes and fears, she left the house and went to where Merodach was lying, still quiet at the foot of the hill.

He had slipped, on alighting, and had rolled and struck his face against a stone. Part of the time he had been unconscious. When he came to life he was dizzy and light-headed from the blow. The impressions which had been made during his recent interview had taken, as it were, bodily forms in his bewildered mind. There was, also, the conviction that he must not move from where he lay, without permission from Tanith. He was under orders, he was a soldier; he must, if need be, die at his post.

Suddenly it was as if he were divided in two. He knew that he was still lying on the ground; yet he saw himself sailing over a troubled sea. Fierce winds were howling overhead, yet through their clamour he heard the song of the sirens, sounding ever nearer; they were drawing him to destruc-

tion. "Chna was right," he drowsily murmured; "it is Tanith; she is the siren. And Hadad was right, for none may escape the witchery of her singing."

The fragrance of Tanith's lily-scented hair was in his nostrils, and the sense of power, of attraction, of subtle influence, moved him as it had when he was with her. Her inscrutable gaze still held him as she sang. She did not move so much as an eyelid, she was absolutely still — all but her lips. She was the most beautiful woman in the world, and the most terrible. She drew him as the magnet draws the steel; she was a siren, and he was lost.

Then he was a boy again, listening to his grandfather speak of the love of the woman who knew that she was beautiful. The old monarch lifted his great hand and pointed; and he beheld Tanith sitting on a rock, singing. He felt that he loathed her exceedingly; but she drew him nearer, always nearer.

"She sent for me to trap me," he muttered, when his brain was somewhat clearer. "She knew from her father that I had slighted her king's friendship for the place of a menial here. She was cunning to snare me in my own words. She was like a tigress, lurking among the reeds for the approach of the unwary traveller. But Miriam was there."

Then his visions left him, and he was fully himself. He knew where he was, and that there was a sharp pain just behind his eyes, that his head ached excruciatingly. And then a strange thing happened: he suddenly recalled the voices he had heard in the night, and immediately recognized the voice of Tanith as having been the one which had moved him to anger. Still stranger was it, he thought, that he should find himself still smelling the fragrance of lilies. Even now, when his mind was clear, he smelled the perfume of Tanith's hair.

But by this time he had also come to realize that he was not compelled to pass his life upon the ground. He was thirsty and shaken; he would make his way to his quarters, and go to bed. But the sound of footsteps caused him to delay a moment. Then he heard a voice, saying:

"It is I, Miriam. Do not move, but tell me, art thou badly hurt?"

"My temples throb and pain a little, but I am quite well," he answered, gazing at her till she longed to hide her face.

"My lady Tanith sent me to you. I have brought slaves with me to carry you to the house. No, no! you must not try to walk. Oh, I knew you should not!" she cried, for Merodach had risen to his feet only to topple over in a swoon. When he regained

consciousness he found himself in a bed, his head covered by cooling bandages.

For two days he was quite feverish, and subject to darting pains. When the fever left him, Tanith had returned to the island, and he was alone with Miriam.

"I have been causing you a great deal of trouble," he said to her. "Why did you not let me make my own way to the house? It has seemed to me that Tanith might resent your caring for me. It was so long before you came, that I have been fearing that she tried to prevent you. You must not bring injury to yourself on my account."

Ashamed, and unable to let him think her better than she was, Miriam made broken confession of her duplicity. "I saw you lying at the foot of the hill — and I restrained myself from coming to you. You had saved me from worse than death. I did not forget it; but Tanith doubted us, and I deceived her. I told her I feared her — I would have sooner died to help you — to prove my gratitude. I lied only that you might live."

"I have never doubted you, Miriam; I could not doubt you."

His voice was so sincere and gentle that it lifted a load from her heart. She appeared to grow younger, and her usually grave manner was bright-

ened by tender playfulness. She asked him riddles and chid him for being unable to answer them. Yet there was no hint of trifling or of unmaidenly levity in anything she said or did. Merodach thought her altogether charming, and he decided that he would not delay speaking of something more than friendship.

The decision brought a change that she was quick to detect. A pleasant confusion took the place of her playfulness. She was like a bird fluttering about a light in the darkness. She was frightened by the power which charmed her.

"Tanith asked me why you were here," she said, hovering close to the alluring danger. "But truly I did not know." The light was too bright; she had to singe her wings, — "Tell me; why are you here?"

"Because of you, Miriam. I have remembered your face since the day I first met you."

Miriam instantly became grave and straightforward. "Then you must not stay here, Merodach. Tanith will discover your reason, and then she will surely kill you. But is there not another and a stronger reason for your accepting such employment from Esmun? I have heard that you almost compelled him to employ you."

"What reason could be stronger than the one I have given?" replied he, evasively.

"I will tell you nothing but the truth. I cannot tell why it is, but I have felt that there should be only perfect truth between you and me, Merodach."

"Perfect truth does not always mean perfect frankness, Miriam."

"Then there is another reason; will you be frank with me?"

"I have a reason for thinking it better for me to be with Esmun than with any other in Tyre," said Merodach, slowly. "And I tell you frankly that my life is devoted to a certain purpose; that, in a measure, I expect to further that purpose through Esmun the merchant. Some day I may tell you more than this. Indeed, it all lies with you how much I shall tell."

"Now you are speaking in riddles," said she, blushing. "How can you say it lies with me, when I have just asked you to be frank with me?"

"Because there are some things so precious that we cannot lightly entrust them to others. If you had a secret dearer than life itself, to whom would you tell it, Miriam?"

"If I had a secret so dear as that, I would keep it locked closely in my heart — unless I told it to you," said she, compelled to reply. Rising, she said,

hurriedly: "You are still weak; you are talking more than is good for you."

"If you will stay with me a little longer, I will be very quiet. Talk to me, Miriam; your voice is soft and pleasant."

"Will it really help you if I stay?"

"Truly it will. The pain in my temples does not seem so great while you are speaking."

"Would it please you if I were to tell you a tale I heard from my cousin David? Then I will stay a little longer." So she began:

"'Behold, there was a famine in the land,' " and she told him the story of Ruth and Naomi.

"That is very beautiful," said Merodach, when she had ended. "'And thy God shall be my God, and thy people shall be my people,' — which of us two shall say that? Would you say that for me, Miriam?"

"Surely you should sleep!" said Miriam, wishing to go, but more desirous to stay.

"I will not leave Tyre unless you go with me. Do you not love me, Miriam?"

She sat silent a moment; then, taking a chain from her neck, she gave him a disk of gold on which was engraved a serpent, and the words, "Jehovah-jireh." "It was given to me by David, when he left me. We are the descendants of Nashom, of

the serpent clan. The name is the name of our God. It is the most precious thing I own; it may protect thee from danger. Wear it, Merodach, for I cannot but love thee."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DISOBEDIENT PANTHER

TANITH passed a full week with her father, sharing his anxiety concerning the fate of their fleet, which should have returned with tin from the south of what is now France. The Phœnicians had for many years a monopoly of the trade in that precious metal. At this time it was brought from England to the Seine; up that river, thence overland; then down the Saone and the Rhone, to the ships waiting for it at the latter's mouth.

As Chna had told Merodach, the natives along this route had begun to waylay and rob these caravans. Esmun had suffered once at their hands, and was now fearing a similar loss. His supply of tin was running short. He had large contracts to fill in Assyria and Egypt, and the delay was worrying him exceedingly.

On the twelfth of the month he received news of the complete failure of the expedition, and he went

directly to Hiram, who was interested with him in the venture. The king was, in fact, a full partner in the merchant's business.

The king listened earnestly to his story, and sat a long time after it, quiet in thought. Finally he asked:

"Is the Assyrian, Merodach, still in your service?"

"He is, my lord."

"And when does our next venture for tin depart?"

"Quite soon; the ships are even now being victualled and prepared for the voyage."

"This is the second time we have been despoiled. It is almost — it is quite necessary that we should protect ourselves. Merodach was the best soldier in Assyria; could we not send him there with a company of brave men? I believe that he could put a stop to these robberies."

"Such was the very thought which came to me when I hired him. I came here to-day to speak of him. But you are ever beyond the need of suggestion."

"Then, as we are agreed, we must not delay. The time is short; send the Assyrian immediately to me, and I will give him authority to command, in your interests, — and we shall, also, be rid of a

genius great enough to cause us trouble, if used against us."

"It is now late," suggested the merchant. "Tomorrow is the day before the Sabbath. On the fifteenth Merodach shall see you, and afterward I will see that he has men who would follow their leader into the presence of Muth himself."

From the king's palace Esmun passed to the canal, — which ran through the island, joining the northern and southern harbours, and which was now open for use, — and was conveyed in his own barge to the Great Square. There he landed and went eastward to his massive, four-storied residence, to inform Tanith of the result of his conference with the king.

"I will write and have him sent to us here tomorrow," she said; "for I have something for him to do before he shall have risen above my service."

"If that is the case, after you have finished with him, you may send him to the king. I shall have work to do, and will leave the matter entirely with you and the king."

Tanith was more than pleased to have matters thus arranged, as she had been thinking continually of Merodach since she had met him. As Miriam had declared, she had been angered by his seeming lack of appreciation. She had used every means for her

adornment, and he had not noticed her beauty. Neither had he used to her the words of flattery, which were so readily given her by other men. Nevertheless his manner had pleased her; she was tired of sweets, and it was tiresome to be compelled to select truth from the silken rags of flattery. Hiram Abif, the dwarf, was, until the coming of this stranger, the only man strong enough to refuse her absolute submission. But he was too apt to have bitterness on his tongue, and she often had a feeling that he wished to humble her pride. More than that, he was a dwarf; the gods had cursed him with an ugly face and a misshapen form. But Mero-dach was beautiful as Melkarth; not beautiful like the Greek, but strong and stately and compelling, like a god. He was braver than most men, too; he had not hesitated an instant from that fearful leap. He had obeyed her command; he had faced death simply and quietly, as one sits down to eat a meal. There was no flattery that could equal such obedience.

Consequently that night she dreamed of Mero-dach, and he was still more as a god, compelling her love. In her dream she fought against him, she struggled with all her might to withstand his power; he must conquer her to win her. She rejoiced in the bitterness of the conflict, but still more in the

completeness of her defeat. His mighty arms crushed her in a clasp that was as death, but which filled her with bliss.

Therefore when morning was come, she lay quiet many minutes while the memory of her dream, and the expectation of seeing him, held her in languorous joy. And when she quitted her couch, she had her tirowomen bathe and robe and perfect the loveliness which was her bodily portion. It was only after they had exhausted all their arts that she gazed first in her little convex hand-mirror of glass, then long and broodingly at the more complete reflex in the larger plate of flawless silver. This time he must learn how utterly she surpassed all other women. Then, after her maidens had left her, she settled herself back on her couch of furs and dreamed again; but this time wakingly, until she heard the tinkle of a silver chain and the whine of Melkarth, coaxing her for his customary release.

Melkarth was a panther from the far East, black, glossy, and young. He had been given her when a kitten; and she had reared him and conquered his wild spirit, till he heeded her slightest word. Now he was full grown, and she loved and petted him.

Hiram, the dwarf, had once told her that she should always have the panther near her, for she was even more beautiful with it by her side. And

because she knew the dwarf to have great knowledge of art and all that pertained to the beautiful, she had treasured his counsel.

To her only was Melkarth subject. She had him chained in her room, she alone fed him, and daily, some two hours before the midday heat, she gave him liberty to leap and play about the room. Therefore she did not now ignore his plea, but, rising, she loosed the chain from his silver collar, and then returned to her couch to be amused by his gambols.

Now he would crouch and creep stealthily, inch by inch, toward her, his eyes like beryls, his sinuous tail lashing from side to side. She spoke, and he would fawn upon her, or rub himself, purring against her hand. Once she had him rear himself to her embrace, so that she could hold her bare arms about him, and feel the soft warmth of his fur. At times she teased and worried him into fury; then she would smile into his flaming eyes, and, by a word, restore him to friendship. Her father had often warned her against her pet, but it was on account of the danger that she enjoyed the sport.

It was while she was thus engaged that Merodach sought admission at her door. Miriam had received a message to send him to the island, and he was come to learn why he was sent. He found one of Tanith's maids standing under the wide portico,

coquetting with one of the king's guards. Such an occupation was not lightly to be left, or it may be that she had been prepared by her mistress for his appearance; for she smiled saucily in the Assyrian's face, and nodded to the open door. At first he thought he would beat a summons on the bronze shield, which was hung by the door for that purpose; but the house appeared deserted, so he turned to ask the maid if the lord Esmun were in. The girl was not too much engrossed to lose his glance. Smiling, she nodded her head again, and gave pantomime instructions for him to present himself in the next story above.

This he did without further hesitation. He passed up a solid stairway, and paused curiously before a heavily curtained door. There was opening enough for him to see into the room, and he was confounded by the sight of Tanith on her couch, while Melkarth stole toward her, his belly touching the floor, his ears flat against his head.

Instinctively Merodach reached for his sword; but it was not by his side; his arms now were only a hoe and a spade. He would have sprung barehanded into the room and flung himself against the furious beast; but Tanith's attitude restrained him. He perceived her careless smile, and knew that she needed no help. The expression of her face fas-

cinated him. She was as he remembered her, still calm and motionless; but the corners of her lips curved slightly upward, and her skin was glowing, seemingly transparent. It was as if he beheld an inward fire veiled by thinnest ivory.

Suddenly the panther spit and gathered himself to spring. Tanith spoke quietly, bidding him quit his folly; but Melkarth refused to obey, spitting more fiercely, and lashing himself more furiously with his tail. Quickly, as though a rift had cleft that ivory covering, light seemed to flash from Tanith's face. Yet it was but the flare of her eyes; she raised herself upon her elbow, and scourged Melkarth with her gaze, till the brute whined and slunk submissive to her knee. She patted his head, and he purred, rubbing against her knee. She spoke caressingly; the panther's muzzle was close to her cheek, her arms were about his neck. Then, while Merodach stood breathless, watching them, he saw her right hand slip, with little pats and loving scratches, down Melkarth's side to her bosom. From there it slipped upward, caressingly as before, but grasping a dagger of finest steel. A sweet murmur of song came from her lips, while her hand smoothed along the panther's fur till it felt his throbbing heart; then the knife went swiftly and surely to its

hilt, and Merodach rushed into the room and snatched the dying beast from her arms.

Even in that moment of strong excitement, he was almost unconscious of what he held; for she looked full at him, and her sombre eyes seemed to veil a smouldering flame. An instant later he dropped Melkarth to the floor — already dead — and asked:

“Has it harmed you?”

She pointed to her shoulder, where a trickle of blood began to redden her dress.

“’Tis only a scratch,” she carelessly protested, but Merodach bound it up.

“I expected to see the prince, your father,” he explained, when that was done. “But perhaps I was sent to you.”

“Has the fever left you? Has Miriam, my slave, cared for you as I commanded?”

“The evil spirit has left me, the heat is gone. Miriam was not forgetful of your command.”

“You may sit down, Merodach, here; I wish to speak to you.”

“Were it not better for me first to have this dead beast removed? Yet why did you kill him? He had yielded, he showed repentance, and a desire for forgiveness.”

"Yes, he repented; but he had disobeyed," she carelessly answered.

"And is disobedience to your will always to be punished with death? Was he not dear to you?"

"Melkarth was very beautiful and affectionate. I loved to have him near me, to feel his soft fur, to watch him leap and play about my room," she said, dreamily. "He was never more pleasing than to-day; but he rebelled, and he is dead. How is it that you still live, after your leap, Merodach?"

Merodach, still standing, gazed down at her, till she wished to strike him as she had struck the panther.

"Life appears to be quite a little thing in the service of my lady Tanith," he said, at last. "You commanded me to leap, and I obeyed. Death should have been my portion. You commanded, and Melkarth disobeyed; and death is his portion. Truly, my lady is as the gods who eat and drink, careless of the death of their servants."

"Are you finding fault with your mistress? are you displeased with me, Merodach?"

"It may be that I am," replied Merodach, with provoking coolness. "When I bought a horse, I began at once to study his temper, in order to learn how best to train him to my needs. Now that I have gotten me a mistress, I find myself desirous to

learn the subtleties of her temper and disposition. Therefore I may be finding fault, or I may be merely seeking for knowledge."

"I thought you a soldier, and, lo, I find you a philosopher. You make me curious to know what you now think of your mistress. Knowledge is more precious than gold, sweeter than spices from Arabia; I wish to learn of myself. But first I ask you to sit here, for I have always discovered that it takes much time to gather knowledge."

"I have many things to do before I shall be willing to quit this earth, my lady. The knowledge that you ask of me may, possibly, have taught me that it is better to stand than to sit—here. I was a witness to your method of punishing Melkarth. When I saw your hand soothing him to complacency, I said to myself, How well she loves her pet. And when I saw how admirably you lulled him into a fancied security, till you accomplished his death, I said to myself, How sweet is my lady before she strikes. Now it may be that I shall say what you do not like, and the knife which slew the panther might be defiled with Assyrian blood."

"When you tell falsehoods, Merodach, you should never underestimate the ability of your listener. You should have known that I could not believe

you; the fear of death is beneath our consideration. Why will you refuse to sit and talk with me?"

"Because I would sit even closer — here," replied Merodach, pointing to the dead panther by her couch.

Once more he noted that quick flash, as of lightning, from her eyes. "Sit even there, Merodach," she whispered.

Lifting the panther, he carried it to the doorway and placed it out of sight; he flung a bearskin over the blood on the floor, and sat on it so that he half-rested against her knee.

"Like Melkarth, I rebelled, and repented," he softly said. "Strike, my lady Tanith."

As he spoke he pressed harder against her knee, his eyes gazing mockingly upward into her face. She bent a little toward him, and rested her hand upon his shoulder, touching his cheek.

"Do you love me?" she whispered, bowing her head until her lily-scented hair touched his face.

"Nay, Tanith," he answered; "not as I have before loved women."

"Tell me of her," sighed Tanith, her hand slipping gently for her bosom.

"It was up among the peaks of the Northern mountains that I met her. We had harried a village, our soldiers were drunk with victory and slaughter.

They were lions, sparing none, men, women, nor children. A young girl ran to me and threw herself at my feet. I cannot tell how it was, but her touch thrilled me; and when she looked up, and I saw the tears and horror in her eyes, I lifted her to her feet and comforted her. She dwelt in my tent two months. She was always cheerful and loving. When I was separated from her, I thought of her—even in battle I remembered her face. And when I returned, her cry of welcome, her yearning arms outstretched to greet me, the music of her voice, made each time sweeter than before. Was that what you meant by love?"

"It may have been love," she whispered, her dagger-hand stealing toward his rounded throat, her eyes smiling into his. "It was surely the love of a boy for a girl. Did your love grow weary? Where is she now?"

"One day the battle went against us. She ran to me, but was struck down by an arrow."

"But how do you love me, Merodach?"

"As a tiger loves its mate," he laughed, grasping her hand just as it was raised to strike. "As you love me, Tanith. Years have changed me since then. The blood runs fiercer in my veins—as it does in yours. There is fire in your love; you are not like her. By the belt of Ishtar! I could crush

you to death as I now hold you — here against my breast. I could leap from yonder window, holding you, dying with you. Your glance turns my blood to fire. Nay; it is not love; 'tis sweetest hate."

"If this be hate, Merodach, let it consume me — here — in your arms. But have you no love for Miriam, my slave?"

Merodach loosed his embrace, and rose to his feet. "You have sent for me," he said. "Is this why I am here?"

Tanith leaped from her couch and gazed fiercely, saying nothing. Slowly, against her will, her hand, still grasping the dagger, sunk to her side. For the moment he dominated her, and she replied:

"I told my father of your obedience. He has suffered loss because of pirates and robbers, and he and I offer you command of soldiers. We believe that you will save us from such losses, if you care thus to serve us. Will you accept such a command, and will you serve us faithfully?"

"I will accept your offer, Lady Tanith."

"And leave Miriam?"

"And leave Miriam."

"To-morrow is the Sabbath, and I have a message for Hiram Abif, the artist. Will you, the captain, carry it to him, to-morrow, for me?"

"Yes, my lady Tanith."

She gave him a roll of papyrus, and directed him to the house of the dwarf.

“After to-morrow, you will go to the palace and inform the king of your acceptance. He will invest you with the requisite authority, and you will be no longer subject to work beneath you. Our vessels will not start until after the approaching festival. I shall therefore see you again.”

Tanith hoped that he would say something to dispel the curious constraint he had placed her in. But he bowed low and departed, saying nothing.

After he had reached the Great Square, he remembered that he had not seen Chna and Hadad for some time. The day was still young, he was freed of his work on the main land, and he concluded to pay them a visit.

As he walked through the busy streets, he fell to thinking. He was, as it were, a traveller pursuing a path beset with pitfalls, and through a country where all he met might be foes. It were therefore the part of wisdom for him to preserve the goodwill of the friends he had already acquired. The death of the panther was too fresh in his mind, and his own narrow escape from a similar fate too recent, for him to ignore the fact that Tanith might use his promotion as she had used her caresses for Melkarth — before she plunged her knife into his

heart. Brave, loyal friends, however humble, were not to be slighted.

Naturally, then, by the time he was near the hut of the waterman, he was deep in the memory of their last meeting. Of course the king had fulfilled his promises, and Chna was in his first enjoyment of a pension large enough to make him comfortable for life. Merodach recalled how the smiles had seemed to expand the wrinkles of the old man's face, how engrossed he had been in contriving for the fullest use of his income; he would spend the remainder of his days in the selection of luxuries which should compensate him for the privations of his youth. Chief of the blessings which should crown his old age was the glory and comfort of owning a slave. The Assyrian could almost see the veteran sunning himself in voluptuous idleness, while his slave fanned him free of the flies that were such a torment to the poor.

But Chna was alone, grumbling and cursing, clothed in rags and discontent. The sun was too hot, the shade was too cool; life was full of shams and disappointments; poverty was the portion of the aged, ingratitude the vice of the young; and the flies were continually about him, hungry for his death.

"You cannot mean that the king has forgotten

you," exclaimed Merodach, amazed and grieved by the old man's woe.

No, the king had done everything as he had promised; but he was, after all, but a youth, and the young were very forgetful. Suppose the king should forget: Chna was old, exceedingly old; the aqueduct had ruined his chance for obtaining a livelihood — what could he do when the king forgot?

"But even the forgetfulness of the king cannot harm you. He has provided against his own forgetfulness, against his own death. He had these pensions made a law of the land; he has made your income absolutely sure," argued Merodach. "Cheer up, old friend! You are fighting imaginary foes, you are in no danger of want. But where have you sent your slave? and why are you alone in rags?"

"My slave?" growled Chna. "I have no slave. I am poor, frightfully poor; and Hadad is wasting his substance in drunkenness. Hadad buying purple and jewels for his women. Hadad is rich. Hadad is a power in the city. Hadad is hand in hand with Esmun, the prince. In one year, in two years, Hadad will say: 'Chna, my money is gone. My father, shall I starve on your threshold?' What should such as I do with a slave! You mock me, you hypocritical Assyrian. May fleas devour you!"

Thus, bit by bit, the veteran opened his heart, till

Merodach knew all its miserly fears and bitterness. Toward night Hadad appeared, glowing with health, flushed with wine, bejewelled, scented, radiant, insolent. He was infinitely above the Assyrian gardener. He had heard that Merodach had had the good fortune to obtain work, tending Esmun's grounds and fish-ponds. His dear friend Hector had told him of it. He was now quite rich, he had made good investments, and he was not one to forget old times and needy friends. The Assyrian had but to say the word, and he would prove his friendship.

Merodach was absolutely silent under this torrent of boastful conceit, and his quiet disconcerted Hadad, who began to stutter and turn a deeper red. Something in the cold regard of Merodach awed him, so that he began to feel young and insignificant. But soon he grew angry; why should this common Assyrian gardener refuse to speak? Whereupon he charged Merodach with ingratitude: had they not picked him out of the sea? Had they not fed him and clothed him? "Speak, Merodach, or, by Ashtoreth! I'll show you the door."

"You are drunk, Hadad; your good fortune has turned your head. If I did not remember your kindness, I should not be here."

Hadad was indeed drunk, and his usual good

humour was warped, for he saw insult and an intention to offend in everything Merodach said and did. And the latter was quite patient, until Hadad had worked himself into a fury, and gone so far as to seize him by the shoulder and threaten to put him out of the hut.

In an instant the two were locked and wrestling for the mastery. The thrill of human contact roused the worst in Hadad. He was a giant in strength, and he purposed to throw the Assyrian and grind his life out on the floor. But, instead, he found himself in a terrible embrace; darkness fell upon him, he felt himself crushed beneath his opponent's knee; he was upon his back, and above him was a face which made him close his eyes and wish for sudden death.

"Slay me," he groaned; "I am not worthy of mercy."

"By Asshur!" laughed Merodach; "you have a hug like that of a bear. But you are soft and out of condition. Some day, after you have worked off your surplus flesh, we'll try another bout."

They were both standing now. Hadad had been sobered by his fall. He looked at Merodach, and felt that the Assyrian had changed into one full of power and greatness. He was abashed by the grave

kindliness of his regard; he tried to make apologies, but the other stopped him, saying:

“The sound of the sea is still in my ears; only death can end my friendship for you and Chna.”

Afterward neither Hadad nor Chna could tell how it happened that they should be standing hand in hand with Merodach. Then they only knew that he was different; their eyes were opened, and they felt that they would follow this man, this commander, this king, wherever he might lead. He had told them of his promotion, and they were glad to promise to go with him, to the end of the world.

Later, when they were asleep on their couches of skins, Merodach went out and sat by the lapping sea.

“Hadad is mine and Chna is mine,” he said to himself. “Tanith is mine and Miriam is mine,” and then he paused, for he perceived that he was standing at the parting of two roads. With Tanith he might rule both land and sea. With Miriam — what?

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE STUDIO OF HIRAM ABIF

It was "the day of rest for the heart," the Phœnician Sabbath, and Hiram Abif was alone in his house on the Great Square. Evidences of his handicraft were all about him: finished and unfinished pieces of needlework, engraved jewels, statuettes in bronze, silver, and gold, drawings, plans for temples and palaces, beaten work and castings, grotesque idols in baked clay, mechanical inventions, and every conceivable product of artistic imaginings, crowded the studio of this most versatile genius, whose later years were to be crowned by the glory of Solomon's temple.

Of mixed parentage, a Phœnician father and Jewish mother; a devout lover of the beautiful; gifted with a subtle intellect, and cursed with Hebrew spirituality joined to the Phœnician heritage of commercialism and grossness, — Hiram was, at once, the most envied and the saddest man of his

time. Very strikingly was this cruel blending of antagonistic elements displayed in the pathetic wistfulness of incomparable eyes in a face of unequalled ugliness. Hands and feet fit for a sculptor's model were united to long, ungainly arms and misshapen, bony legs. A brow of exceptional depth surmounted protrusive shoulders and a humped back. And the curse of incongruity could also be seen in his work: in the grotesque idols he designed for trade with ignorant tribes; and in the grandeur of design and delicate loveliness of Solomon's temple.

All tastes could be appreciated and catered to by Hiram, the cunning dwarf. The superstitions of the most degraded savage, or the aspirations of David of Israel, were alike familiar to this double-natured artist. He could dicker and lie, could plan and sell with any merchant in Tyre. He could be also the philosopher; could perceive his lower self and mock at it, separate the false from the true, discern the values of opposing interests, and view impersonally the justice of things he hated. Also there were periods when he craved the best; times when the excellence of personal holiness gave him conception of a holy God; times when purity, honesty, and integrity were chiefest and most to be desired.

Hiram Abif, first of artists, combined the sym-

bolic ideality of Egyptian art with the realism of Assyria. He was the forerunner of Phidias and Praxiteles; of the art which made Greece preëminent in sculpture. Finally, he had the quality of analysis, the ability to penetrate the secrets of the human heart. He, only, could fathom some of the darker depths of Tanith's nature. He loved her, passionately, hopelessly, cynically, loathingly. And yet he only had discovered the spiritual loveliness which underlaid the character of Miriam; and he adored her, he worshipped her inherent purity, dreaming of her as of an unapproachable, uncontaminated divinity.

But, after all, the depths of the shallowest nature are unsoundable, and we are constantly amazed by what we must ignorantly term the inconsistencies of humanity. The veil of the holy of holies is, indeed, often rent and torn, but there are ever hidden corners behind its tattered rags.

Let us, therefore, return to the fact that it was the Sabbath, and that the artist was alone with his creations and himself. A cleared space had been made in the middle of the room; the successes and failures of a master hand and brain had been carelessly thrust aside, and Hiram was sitting in reverie before his two most recent creations. Side by side they stood, his two statuettes in bronze.

One was meant to represent Esmun, the eighth and most powerful of the gods called by the Phœnicians the Cabirim, — the dwarfs who guide, protect, and control the sailors on the seas. Two of the seven visible gods (the Pleiades) point to the polar star, but Esmun, the eighth, cannot be seen by mortal eye, and it is he who blows the deadly mistral or gentle zephyrs, as he wills.

Hiram had modelled the god with Assyrian attention to detail and truthfulness to life. Veins, muscles, and joints were perfectly shown, and the texture of the skin was wonderful. The face of the god was full of power, whether for good or ill.

The other figure, which represented Ashtoreth of the silver crescent, — the goddess of love, — was fashioned more along the lines of the best Egyptian art. At least this was true of her lower limbs and feet, which were seemingly unfinished; but from the waist upward the workmanship was of exquisite finish. Mystery brooded in the long, half-shut eyes. Her lips were full and, at first view, stern; but about their corners hovered a suggestion of ineffable voluptuousness. The nose was perfectly feminine, but inclined to massiveness, and the brow was broad and smooth. Add to this an indescribable charm, a tantalizing subtlety of expression, and we have,

after all, only the barest outline of Hiram's masterpiece.

The artist was so engrossed in viewing his finished work that Merodach had to knock repeatedly before he could make himself heard. Yet finally Hiram became conscious of the brazen clamour, and the Assyrian was invited to enter. The message was delivered and read, and the dwarf walked restlessly about the room, disturbed by its contents.

For in it Tanith reminded him of the nearness of the festival, of the feast the king was to give, and she besought him to design for her a garment of exceptional beauty. On it she wished a needlework presentment of the god Melkarth. "And it will please me," ran the note, "to have the god bear likeness to him who will deliver this, my entreaty. For surely, O Hiram, there is not in all Sidonia one better fitted for such honour than this Merodach of Assyria. It is my earnest desire to show forth the excellence of thy handiwork, the perfection of thy skill. May the gods favour thee as thou favour-est me."

A sneering smile distorted Hiram's face. "The gods have blessed you with twofold richness, Merodach of Assyria," he said, careless of the effect of his insolence. "First, you have obtained favour with the lady Tanith; and, second, you have rea-

sonable hope of becoming immortal through the cunning of Hiram the artist."

"As I am ignorant of the words of the message I brought, it is impossible for me to understand all your meaning. It is only plain to me that my double blessing will not compare with the one you have already received."

"You speak in riddles," sneered Hiram. "Will you not enlighten my ignorance by informing me of the nature of my good fortune?"

"You live after an inexcusable insolence. Does this message require an answer? I would leave you before I forget that we are strangers."

"By Melkarth!" laughed the dwarf, "you have struck me fairly. Skin for skin, yea, all that he hath will a man give for his life; and because I am still young in years and have much left to accomplish, I am grateful for your forbearance and self-control. Now tell me, Merodach, what will you do to one who acknowledges his fault, and asks you for forgiveness?"

"If he ask in earnestness and from an honest heart, I will meet him half-way; if he ask only for the sake of talking, I will treat him as it may please me."

Hiram was silent a moment, then he became quite

grave. "I was no better than a spoiled child; I honestly desire your forgiveness."

"I was sure that I had not underestimated the maker of these," replied Merodach, pointing to the two figures. "I should consider myself honoured by the friendship of the greatest artist in the world."

"Friendship is a plant of very slow growth; but your forbearance has planted the seed. Are you, too, an artist?"

"I have seen and watched the best artists of Assyria and Babylon at work. I have envied them their cunning and skill, but my life has been that of a soldier, my tools a sword and spear."

"Yet you have the artist's eye, and you cared to watch them at work. Step a little backward — here — and look carefully at them. Then examine them from a shorter distance, and tell me the thoughts these figures give you. Speak plainly and frankly, as you already have, and count me worthy of honest correction."

"This is certainly you," said Merodach at last of the male figure. "It is wonderfully done; the eyes of a god, the lips of a demon. It is surely you; but the longer I look at it the more it seems other than you. And it has the appearance of life, overflowing life and power. The best of Assyria

and Babylon are as children compared to the maker of this."

A proud smile lit Hiram's face, but there was genuine humility in his reply. "It seemed to me that there was improvement in my work; but I cannot make this bronze present the figures of my dreams. It is, after all, hardly more than a man; the god I wished to make has eluded my grasp." Then, turning to the other figure, he softly said: "And this one; is it of equal merit?"

"Ever since I came into the room I have been seeing her. And her eyes have seemed to follow me wherever I went. It is my lady Tanith, the daughter of Esmun."

"You say that her eyes have followed you; is that all? Have you heard nothing from her lips?"

"She speaks in whispers heard only by the heart. Her voice is like that which moves one at night, when the crescent of Ishtar hangs over the hills, and the air is sweet with the scent of flowers,—and when you are thinking of an absent loved one. I have tried to consider why you have left her lower part unfinished, but I can see nothing save her eyes and her lips; they hold me, and I find myself listening to hear her speak. The other has life and power; but she has the mystery of death.

She says that death with her is sweeter than life, — that the choicest flower blooms amidst decay."

The smile deepened in Hiram's eyes. "Can you think of anything lacking?" he almost whispered. "She has appeared to me — here — even as she has to you. But there is still more; what have you seen of Tanith?"

"I have seen what is not here; flame leap from her glance, then deeper gloom," replied Merodach, still under the spell that had impelled him to unwonted speech.

"And when you saw the flame, you saw death close by her side. Who caused that glance? Even I have seen it only once. Whom did it strike?"

"There were only we three: my lady Tanith, Melkarth the panther, and myself. Melkarth delayed obedience. Her hand glided softly and caressingly along his side to her bosom, and came back snake-wise along his fur until she reached his heart with her dagger."

"Tanith permitted you to see that! Did she know that you witnessed all she did?"

For some reason Merodach was loosed of the spell. The sudden realization of how he had talked was as wormwood and gall to one of his nature. Was he a silly, garrulous boy, to be showing so much to a stranger? He could not comprehend

why he had acted so utterly at variance with instinct, training, and habit.

"I have forgotten my duty in my interest in your work. Does my message require an answer?"

"I cannot tell; I have not decided. But I wish you to stay a little longer. I am, as you see, altogether an artist, and it is only as an artist that I may say that I have never till now seen such a form as yours. Hadad the sailor and Hector the Greek are both unusual in their way, but you are perfect."

"In such a manner one examines a horse or a slave before buying," returned the Assyrian. "I comprehend that you mean no insult; but it displeases me. I will bid you farewell: May Asshur grant you long life and an abundance of prosperity."

"Have I really displeased you?" asked Hiram, quite sadly.

"Only for an instant; not beyond forgiveness."

"Then why will you insist on leaving me?"

"Because it seems wiser for me to go."

"You have changed so suddenly that I am anxious to learn the reason. Just a little while ago you asked for my friendship. You spoke frankly to me then; then your voice and manner became cold. For some reason you regret your frankness. Have I lessened in your esteem so quickly?"

Merodach replied with unusual directness and sincerity. "When I was a young boy, I spoke just as I thought, without reservation or concealment. I was truthful and frank because I was young and among those who loved me. Years have passed since then, and I have learned that men must keep their thoughts as in a walled city. I have learned that sorrow and loss are joined to open lips and a nimble tongue. This knowledge and habit of life have been mine for several years. Yet, to-day, I have met you for the first time, and I have found myself talking entirely too much. This is quite beyond my comprehension. Now, because I have felt a strong desire for your friendship, I have explained why I have returned to my usual self. I must not let myself continue in such looseness of speech."

"I have wondered why it was so, but truth and frankness are always given me. Tanith is the daughter of lies; but even she opens her heart to the ugly dwarf. The words of Hiram the king are as the waves which sparkle upon the surface of the sea to hide the depths; but he is truthful and strangely frank with me. It is true that I have known none in all the world that can use bronze, and wood, and jewels, and fine linen, and stone, and turn them into things of beauty as I can; but still I am

only 'Hiram the dwarf.' Were I like you, Merodach, it might be different, — I cannot know, but so it seems to me. I am the dwarf, and man and woman have considered me as a thing to be used: a receptacle for burdening secrets, a plaything, a tool. There is only Miriam, Tanith's slave, who has a belief that there is a heart in the crooked dwarf; she, only, comes to me as a friend. Now, because I have discovered no trace of scorn or of pity in you, and because you have been willing to tell me your reasons for leaving me, I am speaking to you as directly and as simply as though I were a child.

"You are Merodach, the grandson of Tiglath-Pileser, by right a king, — for so Hiram told me. I am Hiram the artist. If you will agree to give me true friendship, I will hold you as a brother. I know not why it is, but I am drawn to you. Sometimes evil spirits possess me and drive me into actions that I loathe; and there are times when there is no good thing in me. But you are able to steer the ship of your purpose through storm and passion; it may be that that is why it is now my turn to ask for friendship."

"Once I had a true friend," responded Merodach. "We slept side by side; we ate out of the same dish; we were wounded for each other in battle.

I had also a woman whom I loved; but my friend was dearer to me than my mistress. Will you be such a friend as that?"

"So far as in me lies."

"Then I swear to you truth and loyalty and brotherly kindness."

"Then sit down, you snared lion," laughed Hiram, "and let me entertain you. First, we will pour out a libation to our friendship in this wine of Cyprus. It has been mellowing a full hundred years for our use. Fie on you, Merodach! you drink as if you feared it.

"And now I will test the keenness of your wisdom; for I desire to know my friend as you know the temper of your sword. Can you solve me this riddle?

"A wooden well,
An iron pitcher,
Stone draws,
Water falls;
What is it, friendly teacher?"

"Indeed, I cannot explain what it is. I have never been quick at reading riddles."

"Yet yesterday when I asked Tanith she told me so soon as the words passed my lips. But she is a woman, and had every reason to know that it is the wooden bottle in which she and her sisters

keep their pills for colouring their eyelids. The iron pitcher is the iron pipe which draws out the liquid from the pills. Because you are a man, I will excuse your ignorance, and give you another test. But now listen :

“ ‘ Over its head the storm sails with delight;
For birds it prepares dishes,
Brings joy to rich and dead;
To poor it causes fright,
And grief it brings to fishes,’ — ¹

What is it? ”

“ Neither can I explain this riddle; yet it keeps teasing me and telling me I am a fool for not understanding what it is.”

“ How often have you seen the fields of flax bending and swaying beneath the storm? The rich make money selling it; birds feed on its stalk; shrouds are made from it for the dead; the poor make of it clothes, and the fishes are caught in nets of flaxen fibre. Truly I am almost disappointed in the understanding of my friend. Yet, now that I think of it, these riddles are peculiar to us here. So I will give you one more trial, and this time I shall ask of something quite familiar to you.

¹ The riddles propounded by Hiram Abif to Merodach are taken from Prof. Naphtali Herz Imber's "Treasures of Ancient Jerusalem." Legend says that they were given for solution to King Solomon by the Queen of Sheba.

"Why is it that Assyrian artists use colour on their statuary? Can you tell me that?"

"I have often noticed that our artists use red and blue and black. They put blue on helmets, on trappings of horses, on flowers and sandals, trees and branches, birds' claws, bows, spears, and arrows. They use red on the king's apparel, his parasol and his mitre, and sometimes they use red on birds and on arms. I have seen black on hair and beard, and in the eyes of man and beast; and quite seldom they paint white in the corners of the eye. I have seen all these colours on our statuary."

"Your eyesight is very good, Merodach; but why is it that they use colours at all?"

"You are an artist, tell me the reason."

"You may not be an answerer of riddles, but you are wise to handle men," chuckled the artist. "So I will explain my meaning. Your artists in Assyria use their figures to lend beauty to the rooms. In these rooms are coloured tiles for the same purpose, — to beautify and to adorn. Therefore they use colour on their statuary to make it harmonize with the tiles. For true beauty cannot exist without harmony; and harmony is sometimes gained through additions that, in other surroundings, would cause deformity."

"You must speak still clearer, for I am in no respect an artist."

"Suppose, then, that I should paint the eyes and hair of these two figures of Esmun and Ashtoreth; would it make them more beautiful?"

"I think it would spoil a perfect work."

"That is well said. These figures are made to be complete in themselves. But were I to aim to add colour and brightness to a room by means of figures and coloured tiles, I must make them harmonize. Therefore I will explain my riddle by saying that the surroundings of a thing—or of a person—often change the requirements of perfection. For example: Merodach seated on the throne of Tiglath-Pileser in the city of Asshur would be like my two statues, complete in himself. But Merodach alone in Tyre, surrounded by strangers and possible foes, is not complete. Therefore, that he may harmonize with his new surroundings, it is almost necessary that we should add the friendship of Hiram the dwarf. For you have already seen and met my lady Tanith."

"And that he may learn more of his new surroundings, Merodach will now take his leave," and Hiram Abif was left alone.

Again the artist lost himself in reverie before his creations. Hiram, the king, knocked in vain for

admission; for he was accustomed to join with the artist and a few others in a Sabbath gathering. But to-day the door was not opened, and the king gave over his effort for admission, thinking his friend was under one of his evil spells. A little later, came Hector; he, too, failed of admission, and went away regretting his lack of success. Some have believed that these weekly meetings and talks with the great artist were the beginning of the society of Free Masons.

By and by the artist took a sheet of papyrus and a reed and began to draw. And here, also, he displayed the master's hand. In strong, simple outline he depicted himself bearing Tanith in his arms. In the distance was a group in which the king, the Greek, and other well-known citizens of Tyre were easily recognizable. Stopping — as artists must — to examine his drawing, something in the expression of Tanith's face and figure startled him. "Muth spare her!" he muttered. "Instead of Tanith, I have drawn her corpse!" Hastily dipping his reed in the pigment, he started to correct his drawing; but he paused again, gave a shrinking glance over his shoulder, as if expecting to see a spirit, and whispered: "Let be! let be! it may be a warning from the gods." Then boldly, and devoid of the yet unknown principles

of perspective, he inserted a marvellous likeness of Merodach reaching to deprive him of his heavy burden. Adding a few more deft strokes, he provided the new figure with the insignia of the god Melkarth.

“Is it in this fashion you would have him, O Tanith?” he cried, in impish glee. “Does your insatiable spirit yearn for gods as well as for men? But you ‘would like to display the utmost excellence’ of my art! You could not lie to me so glibly were we face to face, Tanith — Tanith.”

These last words, the repetition of her name, were uttered with indescribable tenderness. Slowly, as if against his will, he went to the embodiment of his dreams. His hand reached out to touch her cheek, his eyes shone mistily and yearningly. “Of a truth, it is you, Tanith, as I have made you. There is none who knows you as I do; and I, only, know you and love you as you are. I formed those lips, — but they spoke to Merodach. He heard words you have never had for me. I gave the curve to those eyes, — but they drew him. Can any other know you and form you with my cunning? Yet I dare not touch even the bronze which shapes your form. . . . Dare not?”

A wild, savage expression distorted his face. He ran to a corner, tore up a mass of draperies as

a dog paws the ground, and returned with a huge hammer. In the twinkling of an eye, he had battered into shapeless bits the best work his hands were ever to fashion. Then, when all was done, he gazed through dull and heavy eyes at the destruction that he had wrought.

“Behold, Tanith, I am a god; I can create, and I can destroy. Yet you love Merodach as you will never love again.”

CHAPTER X.

“ I WISH THAT THOU WERT ONLY THE GARDENER ! ”

FROM Hiram's house Merodach returned to the hut of his friends. After arranging with Hadad to carry a request to Miriam for a meeting on the following afternoon, he borrowed their boat and spent the remainder of the day on the water, alone.

Early the next morning he borrowed some shekels of Hadad, and, wearing once more his beloved sword and cross-belts, he chattered among the shops on the square until he had purchased clothing to correspond with his new rank in Tyrian society.

By ten o'clock, according to modern time, he had changed his apparel, and was seated in the ante-chamber of the king's palace, awaiting his turn amongst a miscellaneous gathering of rich and poor, high and lowly.

From the beginning of his reign, the king had reserved the two hours just before noon for the hearing of complaints, the settlement of disputes,

the righting of wrongs, and all the usual and unusual matters which required personal contact with his subjects.

In Assyria the king was unapproachable. Petitioners were compelled to seek the ear of the grand vizier, or prime minister, who alone was permitted free access to the royal presence. But among a mercantile people, where time was, as we have it, money, the ceremonies were shorn and neglected. Caste was unknown in Phœnicia,—again for business reasons, as the richest and noblest did not care to miss a chance of profit by reason of unbusinesslike pride.

Merodach was interested by the peculiarities of this democratic palace. Instead, for instance, of meeting one wearing the tasselled apron and fringed band depending from the fillet, and the long scarf ending in double streamers which fastened the belt (distinctive marks of the Assyrian prime minister), he and the lowliest Phœnician subject dealt with the king himself. Moreover, there was here an absolute lack of favouritism. He looked in vain to discover even one fat-nosed, double-chinned eunuch eager to barter for the privilege of instant admission into the inner chamber. On the contrary, he was placed in strictest accordance with his time of appearance, directly following one

apparently fresh from the shambles in the market. As may be believed, this was not altogether agreeable to the lordly Assyrian. He could descend of his own will, but he had no sympathy for democracy.

Thus full forty minutes passed ere a page ushered him through the gold-plated doorway into the "Chamber of Justice." And there he met not so much the king as a keen, busy man of affairs, a king of merchants, who spoke in simple directness.

"I have been requested by Esmun to give you a commission which will authorize your command of soldiers, wherever the interests of his business may require it. In addition to this commission, I have for my own pleasure and profit made certain provisions. With the exception of the captains in the cities of Sidonia proper, and of the two colonies of Utica and Gadir, you are to be second to none. Already proclamation has been sent to all our other colonies that obedience shall be rendered you whenever and wherever it may be necessary to further our interests by the use of bow and spear. In a word, Merodach, I appoint you commander of all my soldiers, with the exceptions already named, with instruction to report to Esmun as my representative.

"Further, you have with this appointment a

rank which will make you second only to the four hundred princes and senators of our realm, and to the governors of cities and colonies. Proclamation to this effect shall also be made to-day in the Great Square. Our treasurer shall be directed to pay you a salary which will enable you to live in a manner fitting to your rank and office. Your commission is dated from the day when you and David of Israel showed willingness to risk your lives for Sidonia's king. Present this order to the treasurer, and he will redeem it in gold and silver of the standard of Carchemish; it is for an amount equal to one-fourth of your yearly stipend. This income will be yours so long as you retain your present command. Have you aught of objection to offer, Merodach, captain of my forces?”

“None, my lord the king; unless it is that you have too well remembered what was not worthy of reward.”

“Were you any other man, I had settled my debt with gold alone. It is not my custom to be careless with men of value. The grandson of Tiglath-Pileser, the former commander of the Assyrian horse, the saviour of the Assyrian army in the battle in the mountains, one of the best soldiers of his day, is worth more than gold. It is my purpose to surround my throne with officers best fitted to

advance the welfare of my kingdom. Again I ask you, are you indeed loyal, Merodach-Pileser, rightful heir to the Assyrian throne?"

"So long as I use the authority you have given me will I be faithful to my trust. By Asshur, Vul, and Ishtar of Arbela, I swear to serve you truly and well. But when I return you this my fealty, I will be subject to none."

"It is enough," returned the king. "Serve me faithfully now, and while you will, and the gods will give me wisdom to deal rightly with you when you are once more the Assyrian and come to meet me, either in peace or in war."

"And now that we have spoken frankly, as king to prince, and inasmuch as, for the time, you are become my subject, I will show you this map. It will acquaint you with the westernmost portion of our domains, the place of your first service. Here are the Pillars of Melkarth; beyond them—here—is Gadir, near the end of the world. Just at this point—to the eastward—is where our vessels must land for tin."

"Of late there have been failures in our ventures; pirates have waylaid our ships, and inland tribes have plundered our caravans. Only a few days ago Esmun received news of a great loss, and he then determined to meet force with force, to

place you in command of fighting men, and so prevent a repetition of such damage.”

“Would it not be well that I begin immediately to secure and train my men? Give me a few that will know my voice, that will act together at my command, and they shall be fitted to cope with a multitude untrained. Place also at my use one of your galleys, that I may accustom myself and them to fighting on its deck; and grant me power to select my officers as you have selected me.”

A quick smile of approval brightened Hiram’s usually grave face. “I would that you were not the grandson of Tiglath-Pileser; I would that you were entirely mine. I have men enough, and to spare; but true soldiers are few, and we have need of leaders like you, able to train and command.”

“You have pointed out this spot as being the place where your ships land for tin. I have been told by an old sailor that the metal is delivered to your caravans at a place far inland. Have you on this map the country in which it is mined?”

“We do not know with certainty where that country lies; but I have marked it as being here. We once had a savage brought to Tyre, who told me that the tin was brought to his people across a narrow stretch of water. He said they conveyed it up a great river, and over the mountains to our

storehouses. But let us return to your request for the use of a galley. Hitherto we have had little trouble in repelling the attacks of pirates with our usual force. There was a time when our fleets covered the Great Sea from north to south and from east to west. But since the Greeks began to dispute with us, we have, for the sake of peace, limited the path of our voyages to the southern route. By following the coast-line to Utica we escape interference; struggle and battle should be avoided by a mercantile people. But at all hazards, we must get tin; it is the true basis of our wealth. The mines of Tarshish are practically exhausted, and we are compelled to make this landing on the northern coast."

Merodach slowly traced his finger along the map, through the narrow strait between the Pillars of Melkarth, beyond Gadir, and into the part marked "End of the World." Ever since he had heard Chna relate his adventures while guarding the caravan of tin, he had looked forward to the day when he might ask the question now trembling on his lips. For this reason he had stayed in Tyre. For the accomplishment of this purpose he had accepted any service which would connect him with the richest merchant in Tyre. Esmun was but a stepping-stone to something which he was deter-

mined to do. He had counted on months of patient waiting, on months of menial toil; and he had not begrudged the price. He loved Miriam, but there was something higher than love. Now, in a moment, his chance had come. So, with his eyes fixed upon the map, he quietly asked:

“Is it not possible for your ships to sail to Gadir (Cadiz), and to bear from thence northward and westward till they reach the land of tin itself? By so doing you will gain the absolute monopoly of the world’s supply.”

“By the Eight Cabirim! that is a daring conception,” exclaimed the king, “but impossible of execution. The waters beyond the Pillars of Melkarth become a mighty current, rushing westward to plunge headlong over the end of the earth. There are terrible spirits in that region, and the vapours rise up from the cataract and hide the sun and stars in blackest night. The bravest sailors would refuse to attempt such a voyage. Yet the conception is a grand one.”

“Have any of your voyagers made such an attempt, and failed?”

“Never; there is no reward too great for him who would dare those perils. There have been times when I have questioned where all that mighty mass of water went; I have even dreamed of at-

tempting the impossible. Speak all your mind, Merodach, for there is iron in your blood, and your will is like tempered steel."

"I have listened night after night to tales from an ancient sailor till perils and adventures on land seemed tame, unworthy the thought of a warrior. He told me of the dangers he had met and overcome in his youth; he mourned because there was nothing in these later days to stir the blood of a brave man. Yet, even while he sorrowed for the past, he spoke of the terrors of that unknown sea, and my spirit burned within me. For I, too, desire to do what man has never done. Asshur has given me power to mould men to my will. Let me have them long enough, and they become as puppets in my hands; my will becomes their will, my spirit their spirit. The time has come for me to show you my dearest wish. Give me, before I leave, a commission that will empower me to command the sailing-masters of what ships I may choose; and I will sail northward and westward to the land of tin, or till I am swept over the end of the earth. Give me such a commission, and I will find men willing to go with me."

"And what shall be your reward?" asked the king, gazing with hungry eyes at the map.

"The reward shall be of your own selection.

Yet, while I am gone, you must promise that no evil, which you may prevent, shall come to Miriam, the Hebrew slave of my lady Tanith."

"I will make that promise now; I pledge you my kingly word that I will guard Miriam till your return — or death. Now tell me, Assyrian as you are, who taught you so well to speak our tongue?"

"There is little difference between the speech of Assyrian, Phœnician, or Hebrew." And Hiram knew from the other's manner that there was an end to that subject.

"I would that I were Hiram, the dwarf, that I might win a more perfect entrance into your heart," he exclaimed, moved out of himself. Then, seating himself at a table, he wrote slowly and with frequent pauses. After which he ended the interview by saying:

"Here is the commission for which you ask; and may your gods and my gods watch between us both, and prevent us from disagreement. For you are the only man I ever met — save David of Israel — who seemed to me a king."

"But you have not yet answered me concerning the galley in which I may train my men," said the Assyrian, still waiting.

"Tell Esmun it is my will that you be furnished with all you may require. You never forget nor

loose your hold. Now may Melkarth watch over you, Merodach, for there is an impatient crowd in the other room. I shall see you often before you leave; and you will eat with me and the prince Esmun here to-night."

In this manner Merodach gained his wish of the king. But Hiram pondered deeply the mystery which seemed to veil the purposes of one whom he well-nigh feared. "Let him discover a sea-path to the land of tin, and I will risk what may thereafter occur."

It was full three hours past noon when Merodach hastened to the spot he had selected for his meeting with Miriam. Hadad had been successful in his embassy, and Miriam had promised to be there at the appointed time; and, half-hidden by the foliage, the Assyrian discovered her, sitting by the frothing waters of the stream from the snows of Lebanon. It was indeed Miriam, blushing and happy, waiting to return to him the golden disk that he had entrusted to Hadad as his credentials.

"Truly the days have grown longer in your absence," she said when they were seated together on the grassy bank. "And you are much changed, Merodach. Does my lord Esmun pay you enough to provide you with such splendid clothing? And

do gardeners wear swords? Fie on you! This beauty is not for me, the slave of my lady Tanith.”

Her words were seemingly merry, but sudden fear had come into her heart; she perceived in him again the air of command, the lordly bearing of the chieftain. She felt that he was not so near to her as when he had been Prince Esmun’s gardener. She feared that he had tired of masquerading, that he was ready to return to his own country.

“The king has made me his soldier, and I am freed of service to your mistress. There has been much to keep me from you, and truly I have missed you, Miriam. Yet you appear lovelier than when we parted, two days ago. You are so white, like an almond-blossom; and your hair is as shining bronze. I can hardly believe that the blush on your cheek and the light in your eyes are all for me, and because of my coming. Only yesterday I felt myself alone, a stranger in an enemy’s land.”

“So I have lost my faithful gardener,” smiled Miriam; “and I am once more alone and helpless before the Assyrian soldier; but my lady Tanith has not now deprived me of my veil.”

She made a pretence of covering her face, but he prevented her, and they fell to talking as lovers will, making the veriest trifles vehicles of their affection. And because they were lovers, they spoke

to each other of their childhood's joys and sorrows. Miriam told of her sister, and he endeared himself still more by his sympathy and manly tenderness. While he, on his part, hardly conscious of the fullness of his revelations, told her of his boyhood, of his becoming a soldier under his father. To her, only, he felt willing to speak of the counsels of his grandfather, of his training and ambitions.

"He used to take me from the women and tell me of the marvels he had seen in this western land; of the sea, its ships, and of the great fish he had caught. He wished to make the sons of Asshur the rulers of the world; and he always regretted that it was impossible for him to make these Sidonians his subjects, that he was too old to attempt their complete conquest. He comprehended the vastness of wealth such a sovereignty must bring, and it was his dearest purpose that I should be trained and fitted for a kingdom embracing land and sea.

"He even secured a woman of Phœnicia to teach me its language and writing. He even succeeded in overcoming the heedlessness of a child; for I grew to long to walk in the path of his ambitions. So I learned many things. When I went with my father against Babylon, I was wounded and taken prisoner by the foe he defeated. But I counted my

misfortune a blessing, for I learned of my captors. Later I succeeded in escaping to Ur of the Chaldees; and I became a sailor in their puny ships, and learned something of their limited sea.

“When a man, full grown, I returned to the city of Asshur and learned of my father’s death, and that Asshur-ab-aram had usurped my rightful heritage; and I bided my time. First I felt that I must fit myself in the armies I meant to command. So I passed the years till I met you, Miriam. It is true that I am now as you see me; but some day I will call upon my people, and I will set myself face to face with Hiram of Phœnicia for the sovereignty of the world.

“Why do you appear so sad, Miriam? Is not the certainty of such a kingdom large enough to bring you happiness? But it is getting late, and I must go back to the city. I have shown you the secret places of my heart. I will be king, and you shall be my queen, and, together, we will rule the world.”

“O Merodach!” exclaimed Miriam, rising, “I wish that thou wert only the gardener!”

CHAPTER XI.

THE PARABLE WHICH CHNA HEARD

FEW quiet-minded citizens of Tyre cared to be caught after dark in "The Street of Taverns," a narrow, unsavoury street which climbed the hill amongst the shadows of the northern wall. It began just between the substructure of the temple court and the wharves belonging to the arsenal. The king intended to have it wiped out of existence, so soon as he had completed the more necessary improvements already begun.

Just at the foot of the hill, and almost a part of the wall itself, stood the "Tavern of the Jolly Dwarfs," a long, narrow two-storied building of massive construction. Over its principal entrance was a piece of bronze work, let into the stone, from the hand of Hiram Abif. It portrayed a vessel, of the sort used in voyages to Gadir, manned by the Seven Cabirim in the last stages of intoxication. Of all the taverns in Tyre there were few so dis-

reputable as this of the Jolly Dwarfs. Yet it was there that Merodach had agreed to meet Hector. After the Assyrian had reported to Esmun for instructions, Hector had been called to join them, and had instantly recommended the tavern for their recruiting-ground. The merchant had seemed inclined to object to his choice, but a significant glance from his secretary decided him to endorse his proposal.

The supper at the palace used so much time that it was approaching midnight when Merodach stopped under the light of the dripping brazier before the tavern. Twice, on his way there, he had been compelled to resent the attentions of night-prowlers, and he had a suspicion that the worst was yet to come. He was well satisfied in being able to enter the low room without attracting attention. Seating himself on a rude bench in an obscure corner, he began to examine the inmates of his queer place of meeting.

First of all he beheld Hector, the drunkest man in the room. He was leaning against the shrine, before which the sailors offered strange vows preparatory to dangerous voyages. Before him sat two men on something like a throne, evidently the principals of a gambling match. One of these two was a stranger to Merodach, but the other was un-

mistakably old Chna; the Greek was filling the honourable position of umpire.

These contests were of nightly occurrence in the tavern, and were conducted under specific rules, which were as follows:

The two entering such a match must select an umpire.

The principals must place everything they had of value with them in the hands of the umpire; and the match must be continued until one or the other was completely despoiled. If one night should prove insufficient to produce this result, they must continue their game night after night until the required end was accomplished. These rules were absolutely fixed.

The two contestants were required to sit with their backs to the umpire, and in full view of their audience, each holding his left hand behind his back, his right hand before him. In regular turn each would then make a guess as to the number of fingers the other had open behind his back. The bets were invariably one-twentieth of the deposit each had in the umpire's keeping.

The judgment of the umpire was final.

It was also customary for the spectators to bet among themselves upon the success or failure of the principals to guess correctly. But to-night there

were no outside wagers; the spectators were obtaining all their enjoyment through watching.

It seems that in the beginning of this particular match, Chna had steadily lost. But quite recently the veteran had noticed the befuddled condition of the umpire; Hector was finding it difficult to count the nimble fingers as they opened and closed for his decisions. From that moment the wily old reprobate had begun to cheat with most successful calmness. When he won, he held his peace; but when Hector thought he lost, he coolly claimed the decision, and bullied the umpire most effectively.

Seated as he was, in full view of the audience, Chna's course was quite patent to all save his victim. The audacity of the cheat tickled the observers, and their shouts of laughter were at last beginning to make the loser suspicious. Merodach waited, curious to witness the ending of the farce, or, what was beginning to appear more probable, the closing act of a tragedy.

Indeed, he was almost tempted to warn Chna of his danger, but that might spoil an interesting episode, and he settled himself more comfortably in his corner, just as Hadad put in an appearance with several women. This boisterous arrival distracted his attention for hardly a moment, yet, when he looked again toward the gamblers, Chna's

opponent had drawn his knife, and was swearing that he was being robbed. In the twinkling of an eye, the two were struggling together on the floor at the foot of the gambling-throne.

Quite before any one could interfere, Chna had his antagonist disarmed and beneath his knee. At the same time Hector discovered Merodach, and was sorely divided by his combined attempts to appear sober and to stop the fight. But Chna attended strictly to his purpose of proving his innocence and integrity. So when his assailant begged for mercy, the old man let him go — minus an ear. Then, vowing half of his ill-gotten winnings to Melkarth, — after his safe return from his next voyage, — he put his knife in its sheath, the severed member in his pouch, and watched with pious calm the retreat of the defeated one through the ribald crowd.

Soon he, too, saw Merodach. Seizing an empty earthen jar, he seconded the Greek's efforts to secure a hearing, and brought momentary silence and attention by crashing it to bits on the vacant throne. "Hector will pay for the jar," he sweetly promised the enraged innkeeper.

Hector thereupon took advantage of the silence to introduce "his noble friend, my lord the captain Merodach." He also reminded his audience of the proclamation they had all doubtless heard

that day in the Great Square, and requested them to listen "while my lord the captain spoke."

Merodach had long since concluded that he had been brought to meet the most perfect ruffians the city could afford. Yet, in accordance with the desires of his employer's representative, he made a brief statement of his needs, and ended by inviting all good men and true to enlist.

Hardly had he finished speaking, when a man stepped into the cleared space before him, and asked :

"How big is the pay offered by the noble captain?"

"Half as much again as that now given to regular seamen," replied the Assyrian, with inward loathing, but outward calm. For on the man's neck and arms were the dead-white blotches of the leper. His scanty hair was of a whitish-yellow colour, and the end joints on two fingers of his left hand had been eaten off by the disease. Besides this, the fellow's gaze was insolent, and his loathsome body was decked with tawdry finery.

Every one present appeared to know "Nathan the leper," and well they might, for he was without doubt the best sailor and the biggest scoundrel in Phœnicia.

"And how many men will you need?" he asked, showing satisfaction at the largeness of the pay.

"Two score and ten at the first."

"I will guarantee the entire number wanted. Set the time and place of our appearance, and they shall all be there, two score and ten of the best and bravest that ever sailed the Great Sea."

"You cannot do better," whispered Hector, well-nigh sober through eagerness.

A peculiar smile passed over the Assyrian's face. "Surely I will kill this Nathan," he said to himself; then aloud: "I am certainly fortunate in the time of my coming. You may bring the men tomorrow morning, at the third hour, to the warehouse of Prince Esmun, near the arsenal. To-night you will all drink as you will, at my expense. But when you appear before me, you must swear perfect obedience. For while I can reward the deserving, I have nothing but punishment for the disobedient."

Tossing a heavy purse to the obsequious inn-keeper, he bade Hector farewell, and left the room. From there he went directly to his friends' hut, and waited outside till Chna appeared. But the latter passed him by without a word, went inside and lighted a lamp, and sat down on his couch.

And there the ancient sat, most aggressively still, until Merodach asked :

“Are you to be expected among the volunteers in the morning? Are you of the party of Nathan the leper?”

“I am neither of the party of Nathan the leper, nor of any other belonging to my noble lord the captain,” was the surly response. “Yesterday — even to-day — I was fool enough to believe that there was none to compare with my lord, the captain. But now I know that this man I worshipped is no better than a child in the hands of a drunken Greek and a scabby villain. I am an old man; I have money enough; I care not to win ill-luck with one who places his head in a trap. I am going to bed, my lord, the captain.”

“You have said too much, or too little, Chna. Yet it may be that you are only drunk.”

Whereupon Chna began to blaspheme with much fluency, while he tried to evade the gaze which seemed to mock him.

“Because I promised before I had come to know you, and because I was fool enough to believe in you, I will speak more freely. Before you entered the tavern, Hector and Nathan tried to get Hadad and me drunk. You saw the tipsy Greek; you saw me on the throne, and you know that they

failed, that I am, and have been, sober. I tell you plainly that they two had a reason for wishing to get us drunk. I know that Hector had arranged with the leper before you came; that Nathan volunteered for a purpose. Pah! it sickened me to see you walk into the pit they had dug. I will have nothing to do with you, Merodach."

"Listen, Chna, and I will tell you a story. There was once a certain man travelling in a strange country. In the very beginning of his journey, he had a suspicion that some of its inhabitants had purposed his death. But the faces of all he met were pleasant, their words were friendly, — but he found that pitfalls were dug along his path.

"Now it befell that one day, toward evening, he met a stranger coming toward him.

"‘Whither are you going?’ inquired the stranger.

"‘To such a place,’ replied the traveller.

"‘Then this is the road you seek,’ returned the stranger, pointing to a narrow path which led among the trees. It was, by this time, quite dark, but the traveller was certain that he could perceive the newly turned earth of a pitfall in the way he was directed. Nevertheless he thanked the stranger, and turned aside into the path of his choosing."

“And the vultures and flies devoured the fool,” chuckled Chna.

“You are in error, Chna. The traveller hid himself in the pit itself. There he waited until the stranger returned softly with his master, the traveller’s secret foe. Then the traveller’s bow twanged twice, and they two fell dead beside the pit they both had digged.”

Merodach ended his parable and bade Chna farewell; but the old sailor would not let him go.

“It may be that you will see your enemies dead beside their own pit; or it may be that you will shoot your arrows against them in vain, — the end is in the hands of the gods. But whichever happens, you have shown me that you are even more than I thought you yesterday. I will go, or stay, as you command me. I will never doubt you again.”

Assuring the veteran of his desire to have him in his company, the Assyrian spent the night on his old couch in the hut. But while he slept he dreamed. He dreamed that he was hidden in the pit of his story. He beheld the moonlight sifting through the trees; he saw the freshly turned earth of the pit. And by and by he heard stealthy footsteps; his enemies were coming to gloat over his death. At last he would settle his suspicions.

Carefully fitting his arrow on the string, he waited till he saw them step into the moonlight. His arrows went as he directed them; his enemies fell, shot by his hand, and he joyfully left his hiding-place to learn who they were.

He beheld the yellow hair of Hector low in the dust, and he smiled at the fulfilment of his suspicions. But when he turned to the other, the moonbeams fell upon the dead face of the lady Tanith. She was dead beyond the slightest doubt. Her sightless eyes stared upward, and the rich colour of her lips and cheeks was turning gray. There was no sign of life in her face, yet it filled him with dread. He gazed and gazed in expectation of seeing the dead eyes fill with their former mystery of thought, the ashen lips take on the lines and subtle curves which even Hiram had found beyond his skill of limning.

Horror grew into his dream and increased till he groaned aloud and awoke. Rising, he went outside; day was still lagging behind the eastern hills, but he could not sleep.

He was also troubled by the memory of his parting with Miriam. He had tried to console the grief his revelations had caused her. Her meeting with David had given her hope that, some day, she might return to Palestine with Merodach. There her

cousin would make it possible for her to forget the past. Peace and love would surround their home among the southern hills. She and her lover would learn of David's God, would be free of the horror that clutched the land of Sidonia.

Such had been her dream before she knew that the Assyrian intended to rule the world. She never doubted that he would attain to his ambition. And he desired her to sit with him on the throne he purposed to win through wars and slaughter. Her dream was quite destroyed, and they had separated, each feeling the restlessness that is so often the prelude of sorrow. So he kept his vigil on the seashore till the coming of day; and Miriam slept not the long night through.

CHAPTER XII.

PREPARATIONS

News of the coming festival had been scattered far and wide. Occasions of such nature were always used for money-making, and the Great Square was being filled with booths. Already the streets were crowded with strangers, and every vessel along the coast, from Egypt, from Greece, from Africa, came packed with visitors. Even the governor of Gadir — with many of his subjects — was on the way. Caravans were arriving from the interior, and it was truly said that Tyre was, for the time at least, the centre of the world.

Meanwhile the citizens of Tyre were using every means possible to assure themselves of the major portion of the catch of this mercantile net. The best time of the year for dyeing — just before the fishes spawned — was past; yet the vats bubbled unceasingly, and naked, empurpled slaves toiled at them night and day, while the piles of murex-shells

grew constantly bigger. The merchants were sorting over their stocks with a keen eye for getting rid of goods hitherto unsalable, and the idlers were being dragged into the ranks of the salesmen.

Thus a strong current of excitement swept through every rank. Hadad worried his feminine friends by reminding them that thousands of the most charming women from all over the world were to be there. "And they will be freed of the silver chains which are wont to hamper their dainty steps," he jeered, "and your occupation will be gone. They will walk the streets at noonday with uncovered faces; not a veil will be seen, and the priestesses of Ashtoreth will smile on high and low alike."

Perhaps the house of Hiram, the artist, attracted the attention of the most people. Everybody desired to catch a glimpse of the new statue of Baal-Moloch. Rumour said that it was to be the striking feature of the feast; nothing like it had ever been seen. Some declared that they had seen parts of it in his room, and the street before his door was always crowded.

The maidens of Tyre were tending flowers, and designing and making dresses. Experimental knowledge was being gained in face-washes, in methods of tiring the hair, in powders and paints;

all were anxious to outshine both friend and foe by the beauty they hoped to achieve.

Also there were present, and coming, jugglers and doctors and soothsayers — and heaven knows what — of every school and description.

It therefore happened that Merodach had difficulty in threading his way to the warehouses of Esmun, prince, senator, and merchant.

First he stopped to behold a white-bearded doctor exorcise an evil spirit from an afflicted patient. His height enabled him to watch the performance over the heads of the spectators. The wise physician was prepared to satisfy the most doubting of his wonderful powers. A basin, full of water, was placed some distance from his patient. When the doctor applied his magic ring to the nose of the tormented one, the spirit would manifest his flight by overturning the basin. The proof would be not only complete, but within the comprehension of the weakest mind. The ring was applied, the basin did upset with a mighty splash, the sick or possessed one ceased to rave and to froth; and the Assyrian continued his course much edified by the advancement of the science of healing.

In a few more steps, he became one of a group surrounding a party of Arabian jugglers and acrobats. Another stop was made to watch a snake-

charmer from the far East. The dancing-girls from Egypt detained him, and won from him a liberal gift. Beyond them was a booth devoted to articles manufactured by strange peoples, to what now would be termed "curios." Here were also maps of distant countries, some drawn by Hiram Abif, and charts of every sea. The Assyrian paused longest here, examining the pictures of monsters and spirits, of "fishes an hundred miles long, exceeding fierce," of "horned giants many cubits high, which do devour men," and of the "end of the earth, where the tempestuous waters plunge resistlessly downward, and where malignant and most fearsome demons are hidden in perpetual darkness to seize and to destroy the unwary mariner."

In these later and more skeptical days, there are some who think that the cunning Phœnicians made it their business to exaggerate the perils which beset a seafaring life, in order to dissuade and prevent competition. But even if that be true, there is no doubt that to them the enchantments of the sea beyond the straits of Gibraltar, and especially the belief in the end of the earth, were real and terrible.

Be that as it may, Merodach, at least, was willing to pay an exorbitant price for the biggest and best

of these charts. But an end came, even to the allurements of the Great Square, and he eventually arrived at his destination a full hour late.

Nathan the leper was awaiting him there with his promised quota of men, among whom were Chna and Hadad. There, too, was Hector, heavy-eyed and the owner of a racking headache, from the dissipation of the preceding night. Moreover, Esmun was there; Esmun, the man of inexorable promptness, the business martinet, was "kicking his heels" for the appearance of one sixty, or, it might be, sixty-three minutes late; and even worse than that was the fact that the lady Tanith was waiting inside. Business was at a standstill, and time was unusually precious during these short days of preparation.

Yet notwithstanding all this, the merchant was complacent and gracious to a degree, to the cause of this delay, when he finally did appear. Nor had Tanith's face, painted though it was, ever seemed more alluring than when she received the salutation of the Assyrian. Whereat a great and wonderful envy filled Hector's heart; never before had the principals of the house of Esmun overlooked the infringement of their law of punctuality. He would have given much for the privilege of being late, very late, that morning.

"It is quite easy to see that you are not a man of business affairs, my lord Merodach," purred the merchant, with an indulgent smile.

"And is it thus that thou wilt win for us thy victories?" lisped Tanith, in the frivolous affectation of fashionable circles. For not the slightest detail of his garb and bearing had escaped her admiring notice. She was charmed by this new aspect of the curled and perfumed warrior. His dainty foppishness in some way served to deepen her belief in his unequalled daring and relentless will. It was as if she yearned for touch of the velvet glove that she might feel again the iron hand.

"It is true that I have overpassed the hour of our appointment," he carelessly replied. "The streets were full of interest, and I had much to think of while I came."

"But now that you are arrived, we will assemble your company before the shrine of the Cabirim, and have them make the vow of fealty and service," suggested Esmun, indicating to the Greek that the men be assembled.

"First let me request of the lord Esmun that he show me the weapons for my men. Afterward I should like to have him and my lady Tanith alone with me in the private room."

Without a word, the merchant led him to a room

in which were piled bronze swords, spears, bucklers, helmets, and armoured shirts in abundance.

“These are all good, of their kind,” said Mero-dach, examining them carefully. “The weight and temper of these swords could not be bettered; but they are of bronze. It is often possible for one to lose much by a too careful consideration of the cost of things. These bucklers and shirts of mail are exactly what we need; but I would suggest that you provide us with steel swords, and that we have longer spears. Some of the wood in these spears is cross-grained and brittle; let the new ones be selected and tested one by one, that they may not fail us in our hour of need.”

Esmun was quick to perceive the force of the soldier's criticism, and he promised to follow his instructions to the letter. He was too thorough a master in his own affairs not to be impressed by proficiency and knowledge in other lines.

A little later they were alone with the Assyrian in the private room, and both father and daughter were curious to learn the reason of their being there.

“Last night, as you doubtless know, I met your representative, Hector, at the ‘Tavern of the Jolly Dwarfs.’ In response to my call for volunteers, a certain Nathan, called ‘the leper,’ assured me of

two score and ten good men. Your Hector immediately informed me that I could not do better than to close with the offer. The time for preparation is short; I am a stranger in Tyre, so I made agreement to meet them here, as you have seen."

"You have acted promptly and well. This Nathan has a large following; by means of him you have saved yourself, and us, the delay of testing and selecting unknown applicants."

"I am pleased to have you satisfied, my lord; but now that I have seen our volunteers by the light of day, I am certain that there are some among them not suited to our needs. There are always some, in such a number, who are proven worthless after it is too late to be rid of them. For this reason I would request that we delay having them take the final oath until just before our departure. We shall, by so doing, leave an opening for new and better men."

"Yet even then may not the lord our captain discover that the new men are not better than the old?" inquired Tanith. "I have heard that the time of action often presents many surprises and disappointments."

"That is undoubtedly true; but some chances must always be taken. I have considered the subject from every side. It is my purpose to add many

more to the number now selected. The news of our desire for men will quickly spread, and soon we shall have offers of more than we can use. Many changes can be made, even in the short time at our disposal."

"Surely no fault can be found with so wise a plan," assented Tanith, without a moment's hesitation, and Esmun said: "We must prosper under such careful guidance. Is there anything more to be said, my lord Merodach?"

"Nothing, unless it be that the king assured me of your readiness to provide anything that I might need to increase the efficiency of my command. If you have no objection, I will take these men a few miles to sea on the third vessel on our right from the wharf before the warehouse. Have it manned with rowers, if you will, and instruct the sailing-master to obey my orders."

Steps were instantly taken in accordance with his request, and it was not long before Merodach and his fifty recruits were well out at sea.

Perchance some would be interested in following each movement, and in hearing each word of this master of discipline; but many would be wearied by such description. It will, therefore, suffice to record that Nathan the leper and all his motley crew soon learned that they were under

an eye that detected the slightest error, that overlooked nothing, no matter how trivial. Soon, also, they marvelled at his unfailing patience, the simple directness of his explanations, the minutiae of his knowledge.

Sailors as they were, they were quick to acquire the quality of place, the ability to attend each to his own particular work. Yet while some were inspired to greater proficiency by commendations won by alert diligence, there were many irritated by what to them was the petty severity of the martinet. To men of this class, great patience appeared no more than as a cloak for timidity. One, in particular, grew tired of obedience; Hanno deemed it a small thing to show his disgust at the methods of his new commander.

This disgust culminated in open rebellion late in the afternoon. A short rest had been granted the men, and they were sitting and lounging in their several places, some thinking of nothing, others conscious only of their wish for a longer rest. The sharp call "to quarters" rang through the ship, and they sprang like one man to their feet, all but one; Hanno lounged motionless in sullen anger.

Merodach had not failed to comprehend the incipient stages of Hanno's disgust. On the contrary, he had marked the man as a fit subject for discipline.

But as if he had no expectation of being disobeyed, he quietly admonished the laggard to rise.

"It pleases me to sit," responded the fellow, with an insolent laugh.

"Throw him into the sea," commanded Merodach of Nathan, softly, but so distinctly as to reach every man in the ship.

Nathan hung an instant irresolute, for the captain had carelessly gone to another part of the vessel. But finally the leper touched Hanno on the shoulder, and made a half-hearted effort to move him. At which the venom in the rebel vented itself in curses and a more flagrant insubordination. He even went so far as to throw Nathan to one side, and, placing himself before his chief, he began to curse him to his face. The ruffian was of exceptional strength and weight, but Merodach caught him by the waist and tossed him over the bulwarks. Then, turning to his startled company, he proceeded with the drill, quite regardless of the wretch swimming heavily in the wake of the ship. Daunted by this new feature in their captain's methods, the most daring and restless became convinced that wisdom did not lie in mutiny.

Immediately after they reached the wharf, the men were dismissed for the night, as their commander did not wish to draw the lines of discipline

too tight in the beginning. He also knew that such a course would permit them to talk with others of the enterprise, and thus bring him more volunteers. Nor was he disappointed in this, as the very next morning gave him the pick of at least forty applicants, all young and adventurous. Consequently, it was not long before Merodach, as he had promised, had requests for enrolment from many more than he could use. In three days he increased his force to quite six score men, thirty of whom were skilled in the use of the bow; and this in spite of the loss caused by desertions, dismissals, and resignations. Of this number, and with what new ones he might select, he intended to provide himself with a final complement of one hundred swords, absolutely of his own choosing.

Among these losses was not that of Nathan, the leper; he did not resign, nor was he dismissed. Yet it may be noted that no sooner had he liberty, on that first evening of his employment, than he hunted up Hanno, who was still wet and furious from his recent bath. Although there are no records of the argument Nathan used, it is known that Hanno saw Merodach early on the following day and begged for reinstalment in the corps. But the captain flatly refused, stating publicly that there was no forgiveness for open rebellion. "You vol-

unteered of your own will," he said; "you joined, knowing that obedience is the basis of service and of success. You deliberately refused to obey. Hector, the secretary, will pay you for one day of service. If you value your own comfort, you will keep yourself out of my sight. You are worthless as a soldier."

No one, not even Nathan, was willing to speak in Hanno's defence, and the man slunk away, followed by the jeers of the entire company. The effect of his warning was so marked that Merodach mourned inwardly over the excellence afterward displayed by the leper. He could not find a single fault in Nathan to criticize, so he was compelled to bide his time, for there was no doubt that Nathan must die before they sailed for the distant west.

As might be expected, Chna and Hadad were noticeable for their zeal and loyalty. Of course the veteran grumbled and blasphemed when he got back to his hut from that first drill, and called all his gods to witness that he loathed a martinet. But no one reported for duty before Chna on the next morning. Day by day he learned the value of prompt, combined action; he beheld the company develop toward the fighting machine it finally became, and he swore to himself that the Assyrian was the king of chieftains. Both he and Hadad

surmised that their leader was one likely to do more than was dreamed of by his employer, and they often discussed in secret their conviction that strange adventures would befall them before they had finished their voyage.

Determined as he was to lose no chance that might help him to accomplish his purpose, Merodach used every moment of daylight in training his men; but his nights were his own. Since the day of his introduction to Hiram Abif, he had grown into the habit of spending his evenings with him. Often the artist would be working over some new design, or perfecting the details of some artistic invention. At such periods the Assyrian would settle himself where he could utilize the one place where he was permitted the opportunity for undisturbed thought. To make this more possible, the artist had cleared an inner room, where his friend might retire in the event of other visitors to the master of the house. This was so great a boon to Merodach that it ended in his accepting Hiram's generous and hearty invitation to make the room his home.

Frequently there were hours when the artist denied himself to all, periods of gloom and depression when he appeared to loathe his kind, days when his temper was of such nature as to make

himself and others believe that he was possessed of an evil spirit. On one of these days Merodach had tried to serve his friend by means of companionship; but he had been so tempted to exorcise the evil one by strangling the altogether impish dwarf, as to cure him of any wish to repeat the experiment.

Fortunately, these spells were not frequent in the intercourse which daily strengthened the cords of their mutual esteem and friendship. Each had genius after his kind, and each was attracted by qualities in the other in which he felt himself lacking; and this fellowship was especially grateful to the sensitive dwarf. The respect of one blessed with physical perfection, unmarred by any appearance of pity, was as balm to his tortured spirit.

Late one afternoon it happened that Tanith had need of some bit of decoration that she had ordered of the artist. Miriam was with her, and, as she did not wish to trust the gem to careless hands, and had no suspicion of whom she would meet, she unwittingly sent Miriam to wait with Merodach while the artist was away from home. The way of a maid with a man was a mystery then as now. Miriam was provided with a method of meeting her lover, and, somehow, she contrived to have her mistress send her to Hiram's studio three times that week. It was most wonderful how she divined when the

artist was not at home, and how she managed to be sent at just such times.

Merodach was thus enabled to learn, by here a word and there a suggestion, the spirit of her hopes and fears. Often he mused upon the difference he perceived in her, as he compared her with the women that he had hitherto known. For he had even meditated over the policy of having Miriam for his concubine, only to learn of the folly possible to the most calculating of men. Fortunately, he discovered his mistake, and was glad that he had not let her suspect the nature of his project.

Thus his cool, scheming mind was brought to a careful measurement of his love for her, as it should affect his ambition. The problem was much harder to solve than he imagined, for this was the first seed of true love that had ever found lodgment in his heart. He had yet to learn that such plants take strong hold downward before they begin to bloom, that knowledge of genuine love comes to most men only after it has become rooted very deeply. So while this love for Miriam was quietly growing into the fibre of his soul, he deemed it so feeble as to justify him in considering whether his wiser course would not be to ignore it; for Tanith was surely his if he wished to have her.

And thus we are brought to the manner in which

he dealt with Tanith herself. It should be known that she was his hostess on each Sabbath night before the festival. There is also no reason to doubt that my lady saw to it that nothing should prevent these Sabbath meetings; for when man is willing, and woman is determined, there is seldom uncertainty in the result.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FEAST OF BRANDS

IN future the king intended to have the Feast of Brands — or of Torches — occur earlier in the spring. But this year he had delayed it, as has been said, until certain improvements had been completed.

Now when all was ready for the festivities, the “city of palaces” was literally packed full of people, and the sound of flutes, of cymbals, and of all kinds of musical instruments had become continuous. Bullocks and sheep were being sacrificed in countless numbers. Trained choirs from Gebal passed through the streets, chanting the sacred hymns appropriate to the occasion, — indeed, it is said that these priests of Gebal have the honour of first using hymns in religious ceremonies. Processions of all kinds filled the streets and added to the tumult; while above everything else rose the insistent clamour of vendors and salesmen.

There were offerings innumerable and of untold value; gold, silver, precious stones, and frankincense were lavished upon the gods. The temple was crowded by the faithful; there were tame lions and leopards in its court; and its fish-ponds were full of sacred fishes. Great trees had been brought down from the mountains and placed in the court to hold a certain kind of offerings. These gifts, for sins of the past and sins to be committed, were hung on the branches of the trees. Piles of scented chips, covered with pitch, were heaped about their trunks, and gifts and sins and trees would be consumed in sacred fire.

Merodach had the secret of knowing when to relax the bonds of discipline. His men were now practically unfit for duty, so eager were they to plunge into the whirlpool of excitement. Therefore he gave them liberty for three days, with stringent instructions to report for duty on the next succeeding morning.

The happenings and diversions of the festival were so varied as to exceed description; but, as night fell, everybody made final arrangements for the ceremony of the brands. Hiram Abif led Merodach to the roof of his house, provided him with a brand covered with pitch, and left him there to watch the beginning of the feast.

The night was warm and beautiful. Overhead were the stars of Syria and the new moon in a perfect sky. Below him were the crowded streets, absolutely void of light and sound. Even the lights of the ships were out, and the huge braziers, which served as a lighthouse on the island's northern point, were deprived of their fire. The shadows of the great buildings were almost impenetrable, and the people were hushed in breathless suspense. Only the eternal fire on the altar of Baal-Melkarth was permitted to burn, and about it were thick veils and ranks of silent priests; all was darkness and waiting.

Finally the voice of the high priest broke the awesome stillness, droningly; the priests chanted response. A flash of light showed that a torch had been lit at the altar, and instantly flame leaped from torch to torch, the court of the temple appeared billowing fire, and a great volume of song rose upward.

Again the high priest droned, the priests chanted response, and a line of tossing torches passed before the lofty portico, and through a lane between the multitude to the Great Square, where the procession halted. There followed a blast of trumpets, a crash of flutes and cymbals, of sackbut and psaltery, and suddenly naked runners sped down the streets,

bearing the sacred fire. From all that waiting people leaped a thrilling shout; every torch was soon blazing, and the smoke and heat ascended as from a vast furnace.

No sooner were the torches lit than the artist appeared to take Merodach to the temple. They were granted an easy passage through the crowds, as all made way for the designer of the new Moloch. Quickly they became, as it were, the crest of the wave of humanity which was sweeping as if to overwhelm the very temple itself. The Assyrian wondered if they would be able to find room in which to stand, so dense was the throng; but Hiram conducted him into the portico, and they were comfortably stationed at a window overlooking the temple court.

"You will miss here a full view of the 'sacrifice of the calves,'" said he, carelessly. "But that will not matter, as they are really but children of slaves. In all other respects you will find this an admirable view-point."

Then he began to point out the various arrangements which had been made to accommodate their guests. To the right of the court were the senators, colonial governors, and officials; to the left were the leading merchants of Sidonia, grouped in accordance with their respective lines of trade. Be-

hind them were sailing-masters of ships, and still farther back were skilled artificers, workers in metal, glass-blowers, potters, moulders, stone-cutters, etc. Beside the priests, and, in a sense, a part of them, was the choir from the sacred college. There, also, were the white-robed ranks of flute-players, the players upon cymbals and stringed instruments. Beyond these, as far as the eye could reach, in the streets and on the buildings were people, struggling, pushing, fighting for places.

The heat of burning torches, the smoke and bituminous smell, were almost stifling. The chanting of priests and the incessant rhythm of shrill music struck responsive chords in the hearts of the listeners, and roused them gradually to peculiar excitement. The religious side of this strange people became uppermost. They forgot their greed, their inordinate desire of gain; for the horror always brooding in the heart of each was loosed and dominant. They were engulfed in the orgies of superstition.

The trees which bore their offerings were lighted and blazed up in leaping flames. Streams of blood ran from the altars; the sound of singing and music rose higher and shriller. Signs of frenzy appeared among the priests and people; a vast surging movement seized their swaying bodies, and many uttered

fierce, inarticulate cries. The heat of closely packed bodies ascended to their brains. Some began to leap and dance around the two Asherim, — the sacred trees, — and the circle grew and extended till one could see everywhere tossing arms and torches, and wild eyes below flower-decked brows and streaming hair. The music swelled to well-nigh unbearable volume; then sudden silence fell, and the multitude stood motionless, gazing upward at the roof of the portico.

Immediately the high priest chanted:

“O Baal Melkarth of Tyre,
O Baal Melkarth of the two Sidons,
O Baal Ashtoreth of the two Sidons, —
Hear!”

And the hosts of priests responded:

“For thy mercy is great,
For thy mercy is great,
For thy mercy is great, —
O Baal Melkarth! O Baal Ashtoreth!
Hear! Oh, hear! Oh, hear!”

Again the voice of the high priest, chanting:

“The blood of bullocks,
The blood of goats, —
Also our gifts in the flames of the blazing trees;

Also sweet savour of incense,
Frankincense and myrrh
We offer, O Baal of Tyre,
Baal Melkarth and Baal Ashtoreth !”

And the priests returned :

“ For thy mercy is great,
For thy mercy is great,
For thy mercy is great, —
O Baal Melkarth ! O Baal Ashtoreth !
Hear ! Oh, hear ! Oh, hear !”

And during the silence which followed this chant of the priests the entire people seemed turned to stone, so still were they. Above the court, sixty cubits high, stood the high priest on the roof of the portico ; and every face was rigid, upturned to see him. So terrible was this silence that a great sigh burst from the watchers’ breasts, when he shrilly wailed :

“ Dost thou not hear, O Baal of Tyre ?
Dost thou not hear, O Baal of the two Sidons ?
Art thou asleep, O Baal of Tyre ?
Art thou asleep, O Baal of the two Sidons ?
Then bring we calves, O Baal of Tyre ;
Young calves, O Baal of the two Sidons ;
Firstlings, unblemished, fat young calves,
O Baal Melkarth ! O Baal Ashtoreth !”

Whereupon the priests chanted the cry:

“For thy mercy is great,
For thy mercy is great,
For thy mercy is great,—
O Baal Melkarth! O Baal Ashtoreth!
Hear! Oh, hear! Oh, hear!”

Instantly a tempest of music, a fury of rhythm, burst over the mighty concourse. Tossing torches lit faces convulsed and yearning; and once more that writhing, swaying, pulsing movement swept through that vast assemblage, faster and faster, while cries of passion sounded shriller and higher. A woman leapt, dancing and singing, into an open space; her flower-decked hair streamed like writhing snakes; her eyes were unseeing and turned upward, and there was foam at the corners of her writhing lips.

“Behold thy cow, O lord of Tyre!
Behold the calf I give thee, O lord of Tyre!
My first born, my only born, my well-beloved,—
'Tis thine! 'tis thine! 'tis thine!”

she sang, and threw her arms aloft. She laughed and leapt; the priests chanted, the music shrilled; and the high priest, on the roof, displayed in one hand her child, in the other a bag of skin. Placing the child in the bag, he cast it down on the

court at the mother's feet, and the people went mad. Another woman sang her offering, another and another, while the "calves" fell fast from the high priest's hands.

A flute-player tore off his linen robe, sprang naked among the singing mothers, and began to cut himself with pointed, jagged shards, strewn there for the purpose. Streams of blood ran down his breast and arms to the pavement. Others joined him, and the place seemed full of bleeding, howling, leaping, naked, frenzied figures. The pavement became slippery with blood, and many fell; many were burned by torches, many lay senseless beneath the feet of the delirious dancers. The tumult caused by the singing, the shouting, and the musical instruments was overwhelming. Naked men, covered with wounds and blood, ran from the court into the streets, and women and girls rent their garments and clothed them in female raiment; for when a woman helped to clothe these men, she was assured of the blessing of love and barrenness.

Fascinated, full of a strange excitement, yet horrified and loathing the sight, Merodach beheld it all. He had witnessed the "Babylonian Rites," he had seen the virgins painted and decked with flowers, sitting ready for the first stranger willing

to enjoy them. He had perceived the sorrow, the wistfulness, the shame of those not chosen after they had waited one, two, three years for the degrading choice; and he had had no sense of horror in the sight. But the voluntary destruction of their offspring, the laceration of their bodies, the bestiality of the Phœnicians, thrilled him with disgust. He turned to Hiram, the man of commanding intellect, the excelling artist, and the eyes of the dwarf were fierce and shining, like those of a hungry beast. He beheld the face of the king as he sat on his throne in the court, and it was new to him in its ferocity. He hated the sight, yet the smell of blood, the fumes of bodily heat, the fury of the writhing, whirling people, dizzied his brain; it was all he could do to restrain his impulse to leap from the window, to cut himself, to cry out, to be as they were.

"Asshur is greater and wiser than thy gods, O Hiram; as the children of Asshur are mightier than the children of Sidonia," he sternly muttered. "We rend not the bodies of the children of Asshur in his worship. We destroy the enemies of our gods, not their worshippers. We will yet conquer and rule the world, because we preserve ourselves in his service."

"These are but the children of slaves," snarled

the dwarf. "Yet when calamity hangs over our land, when the gods are angry, we will give freely of our best. We are ready to die for our land if need be, O selfish Assyrian."

"Ye shall die for us," retorted Merodach, grimly. But the artist did not hear him.

"Stay here," he wildly cried; "for I must attend to the god Baal-Moloch."

So Merodach remained there alone, and watched until he saw the purple curtains, which had veiled part of the court, fall to the pavement, and heard the acclamations that greeted the new image of the fiery god.

Red-hot it stood, an image of bronze; a gigantic man with the head of an enormous bull. Behind the head were golden rays, as of the sun, the scorching sun of drought and famine. Seven times heated was the hollow image, and its eyes blazed balefully because of the flames within.

"O Baal Moloch of the scorching breath,
O Baal Moloch of the fiery heat,
O Baal Moloch great and terrible,—
Hear! Oh, hear! Oh, hear!"

sang the priests, as the fiery blast rushed over the court.

Groups of women circled round the horrid god,

each bearing in her arms a child, each singing and dancing in hideous abandon. Suddenly a priest darted to one, caught from her her child, and placed it in the monster's arms; the clank of machinery was heard, the arms were slowly raised, a great hole opened in Moloch's breast, and the child rolled down into the image and was consumed. The ceremony was repeated again and again; the smell of burning flesh grew stronger, the machinery clanged louder and faster.

This was something new in Tyre, for hitherto the arms of the god had been motionless, and the victims had rolled from them downward into an open fire at its feet. Consequently this new invention of Hiram Abif roused the spectators to the extreme of admiration and excitement. And it was at this moment that the rabble evinced signs of disorder, and began to cry out against the rich.

"These are but slaves — the children of slaves!" they hoarsely shouted. "The great god is mocked; the children of the poor, of slaves, are not enough! Give us children of the rich, free-will offerings! Where are the rich? Where are the rich?" howled the mob.

The king's countenance became dark and stern. He spoke, and the peals of horns drowned the rebellious cries; but the fierce demand swelled louder

and dominated the music. Chna was there, inciting to anger; the women of the street ran about, increasing the tumult. The faces of the rich and the well-to-do grew apprehensive. A movement began toward them. The king rose from his throne and beckoned for silence, but the clamour deepened. "The rich! the rich!" shrieked the rioters. "The children of slaves are a mockery! Give us children of the rich!"

"The rich buy offerings of the poor!" roared Chna. Acts of violence were beginning, and a serious riot was imminent. Again the king made ineffectual efforts to attract their attention, but there was, instead, a rush toward the favoured ones in the court; several of these were thrown down and trampled into insensibility. Then Hiram abandoned persuasion, and shouted to his captain of the guard; and the soldiers fell upon the rioters, striking with spear and sword.

A sneer curled the Assyrian's lips, as he noted the lack of generalship shown by the officer in command. "He is no better than a child in a thunder-storm," he said to himself. "And his soldiers are no better than a mob. They will stop the riot, because it has no leader, but so feebly as to leave a consciousness of power in the rabble. They will learn their strength to-night, and the next time they

rise, they will sweep the soldiers as leaves are swept by a wintry gale. Even now it lacks only a leader to fill the city with bloodshed and rapine."

This prediction was amply verified; for while the sluggish, inefficient guard reduced the half-hearted mob to a semblance of order, there were still signs which showed that the trouble had not been fully quelled. There were many threats of a future day of reckoning, when the rich should give — not money, but their own offspring. There were promises of an uprising that should cleanse the city of selfishness. "Wait till the gods are angry; we will see then that they are satisfied," yelled the rebels.

But now that peace was in a measure restored, the cowering priests became more assured, and recommenced their chanting. A cart drawn by milk-white cows, covered with flowers, appeared in the temple court. In the cart was the holy stone, fallen from Ashtoreth, buried in flowers. The musicians ranged themselves in line; the calm-eyed kine gazed pensively about them; the music took a softer key; the drivers prodded the cows with beribboned goads, and the cart creaked slowly through the court, its wheels crushing fragrance from its flower-strewn path.

Priestesses of Ashtoreth swept behind it, dancing

and casting alluring glances to right and left, singing of the sweetness of love, of soft surrender, of man and maid and brooding night. Throngs of virgins broke the silver chains which fettered their ankles, unbound their hair, and joined the procession, leaping and shaking their flower-crowned heads. Young men sprang among them, and those in female garb passed along the line, singing of Ashtoreth and the joy she gave.

The procession passed below the window where stood Merodach, and he looked down and beheld Tanith among the priestesses; and she, looking upward, beheld him. In an instant the quiet of her face was broken by passion, her eyes were full of longing. She beckoned to him; she was as a magnet and he as the steel, and he went down to become one of those who danced through the streets and over the causeway, toward the tents which dotted the low hills beyond the older city.

To him Tanith was altogether changed; it was passing sweet to know that for him alone she glowed in tender, smiling request. He was in a mist of passion. He knew that they stopped on the causeway, that the high priest joined salt water to fresh, proclaiming the marriage of land to sea; but he knew it as one who dreams. He saw the flaming torches, the flutter of dancing-girls, but he saw as

in a dream; and as in a dream the face of Tanith drew him onward. Dreaming, he heard the song of love, and the dream of bliss held him as in a spell. Whether he leaped or danced or sang, he could not tell; he only knew that Tanith was there, that with her he was approaching the purple tents.

She spoke to him languidly, and languidly he replied. She was his, and there was in all the world only her face, and love. Her hair was fragrant, her eyes were stars, shining softly through a tender haze, and the night was soft and warm. She had torn her dress to clothe the flute-players, but on her breast was yet the embroidery showing the god Melkarth, and Merodach recognized in the face of Melkarth his own likeness.

The scenes of horror were forgotten, his loathing was of the past, nothing was left but the present; just before them were the shrine of Ashtoreth beneath the trees, the asherim near the shrine, the tents of Ashtoreth, — and the night was still young. Their hands were now together, warm and throbbing; she gazed upward at him and smiled, and he bent to kiss her. His arm was around her waist, but, clear as a picture on canvas, he seemed to see her hand slipping down the panther's side, and passion left him.

Tanith shivered voluptuously in his embrace, but

he drew backward, his arm quitted her waist; and they both beheld Miriam, gazing at them with shame and horror in her eyes.

At first a gust of rage went through Merodach; it angered him to have her there. She was a slave, yet she had dared to spy on him, to come between him and Tanith; and there was scorn in the steady gaze she gave them. But there was even more of grief than of scorn, and her sorrow destroyed his rage. Sudden appreciation of her purity sprang to life in his heart, and he turned to Tanith, — her face seemed to have grown coarse and vulgar, her beauty reptilian. He looked again at Miriam, and she was like a flower among foul weeds. He seemed to hear the counsels of his grandfather sounding in his ears, and he despised himself for his forgetfulness. How could he have thought to place such as Tanith beside him to rule the world; Tanith who could not rule herself?

“Come,” she whispered; “we shall spend the night with Ashtoreth. You are tall and strong, my love, like the cedars of Lebanon. I am sick of love for thee, O Merodach! The night is soft and spicy; behold the tent I had prepared for thee and me.”

“Nay, my lady Tanith,” he steadily replied; “it is very late, and I have work to do; and here, too,

is Hector waiting for you. May Asshur keep you, my lady, for I am hardly more than a stranger in Tyre; its customs bewilder me."

It was as if the eyes of a tigress blazed upon him, for Tanith was given over to rage; she was like a furious, deadly beast. A fierce cry burst from her lips. "You cast me from you like a discarded toy." Then she laughed, and called to Hector. "See this Assyrian dog," she said, smiling yet clasping her hands fiercely together. "He has become a cur; the sight of my Hebrew slave has unmanned him; he is a woman in man's clothing. Come with me, Hector, there is love in thine eyes; come, and thou shalt learn what this fool hath lost."

Saying which, she left Merodach with Miriam, outside the purple tent.

There is no need to dwell on the fury of Tanith, nor to describe how she wrought with Hector, playing with his heart and passion, till he vowed to achieve her love by compassing the death of Merodach. For only death could repay the slight she had received. Yet, after she had brought him to her will, she mocked the Greek.

"Your words are ever bigger than your deeds. You are as beautiful as a god, Hector, but at the bottom you are a craven. No, no; you shall not have my love until you prove your manhood. Bring

me the head of that Assyrian dog, and there is nothing I shall deny you."

So Hector swore with many an oath that her desire should be gratified.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MEETING AMONG THE PALMS

HECTOR went to see his friend, the artist, on the morning after the feast. For reasons not hard to understand, Tanith had granted him a furlough from work at the warehouses. Hector was too wise to tell any one of his promise concerning Mero-dach; but the magnitude of his undertaking had given him heroic proportions, as he viewed himself, and he was absolutely compelled to relieve the inward tension by talking. So, as was his custom, he used Hiram Abif as a safety-valve.

The artist preserved a sardonic silence during his friend's recital; he loved Hector for the glimpses he gave him of foolish humanity. He could listen to the Greek for hours at a time without the slightest touch of weariness; and to-day he perceived that something of unusual importance was in the air, for Hector was mysterious and fateful. Hector spoke of deeds of heroism as common folk talk

of the trivial affairs of every-day life, but with an artistic simplicity which lifted him above the ordinary boaster, while Hiram sat hugging his knees, full of admiring complacency.

“I have often marvelled at the beauty of Hope,” said he, after the Greek had exhausted himself of an expansive eulogy of bravery. “Hope is a god dwelling in the bosom of a few favoured mortals. Hope is the most beautiful of all divinities; his — or her, because I deem her feminine, — her loveliness is absolutely indestructible. The waters of failure cannot drown Hope; she floats above the sea of calamity like a bubble on the waves. Hope cannot be bound and imprisoned by the limitations of natural cowardice or of incapacity; she soars, radiant, unshrinking, above scenes of carnage and of blood. Happy must be the man in whom she selects to abide, for she never leaves him so long as his life will last. I have known a few in whom she dwelt. They are moved, let me say, by heroism; in fancy they conceive themselves the bravest of the brave. They dream of great, sounding deeds; the moment of test comes, — they fail, miserably, completely. But Hope touches the dreamer’s eyes, and he sleeps again to dream new dreams of god-like action. They live in cowardice, they die in failure; and their last living belief was that, some

day, they would dazzle the world by their bravery. Indeed, Hector, I would that Hope were not feminine; for then Hope might overlook the ugliness of my body, and leave thee for me."

Possibly it was not always a pleasure to commune with Hiram Abif. Hector had for years had moments in which this thought worried him, and to-day was one of those disagreeable occasions when the dwarf distilled venom. Well, it would not be long before this gibing-tongued dwarf should sing his praises. He was resolved to slay the Assyrian with his own hand, to prove to Hiram that he was no coward, to Tanith that he was worthy of her love. Time and again he beheld himself presenting to her the grim trophy of his prowess, as, in anticipation, he tasted the sweets of his reward.

He was resolved not to see her again until he had done the deed. Therefore he left the unappreciative artist, and sought out Merodach. He became, as it were, the Assyrian's shadow, so that the latter tired of seeing him, of meeting him so often and unexpectedly. From which it followed that, on the evening of the second day of this unloved companionship, Merodach gently suggested to Hector that the prince Esmun had more need of a secretary than had he, the captain of soldiers.

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An overwhelming fear fell upon the Greek on account of the glance accompanying this hint of intrusion. His knees became tremulous, his breathing difficult, and he was tortured by the oft repeated consciousness of bodily cowardice. Then the memory of Hadad, the fearless brawler, of Chna, lean and subtle, and of Nathan the leper, the unmitigated scoundrel, came to him as if it were an inspiration of the gods.

He sadly admitted to himself that the time had not yet arrived for him to display the true quality of his own bravery. Truly it sickened him each time he recalled the Assyrian's glance; and heroism was not wont to exist with nausea and a sweating back. It would be the better part of wisdom for him to part with many shekels of silver of mercantile standard. Furthermore, he reminded his quaking heart that, hitherto, there had been nothing but friendship between him and Merodach; it would be unseemly for the hand of a friend to strike down the unsuspecting stranger. Wherefore Hector arranged for a meeting with Chna, Hadad, and Nathan that very night in the tavern of the Jolly Dwarfs; and when they were all met, he bargained shrewdly with them over the amount of blood-money.

Chna was still surly on account of the failure of

the riot he had started; Hadad was two-thirds drunk, and the other third reckless; and Nathan rolled as a sweet morsel beneath his tongue the thought of earning good pay by killing the man he had come to hate. Yet the instinct of barter was so strong in each, they were all such good men of business, that it was not till Hector had paid down in advance a heavy sum, and the night was far spent, that the bargain was finally made.

Afterward, when the Greek was gone, there was a long and heated dispute between the three as to which should be granted the privilege of striking the first blow. Unable to agree, they at last drew lots, and Nathan praised his gods for his wonderful luck. His cruel eyes shot fire beneath his whitish-yellow brows, and the smile on his leprous face was diabolical while he promised his companions that his blow should prevent the need of another. Meanwhile the day for the departure of the expedition was at hand. Two long, narrow-decked biremes had been manned with rowers and provisioned for the voyage. Final selection of the men for the company had been made, and they were under orders not to leave the ships without special permission.

Since the night of the festival Merodach had felt no desire to meet the lady Tanith. The memory

of the overthrow of his misconceived plans rankled in his mind, and his self-respect had received a severe shock by the sudden knowledge of his own possibilities for folly. On the other hand, his admiration for Miriam's higher qualities was strengthened; he was beginning to have a truer appreciation of her character. There was much to be said to her, and he grew impatient to be alone with her before he sailed; also he was curious to learn how she had been affected by seeing him with her mistress. Therefore he had used Hadad again as his messenger, and had arranged for another meeting by the river.

This time he was the first to arrive at the trysting-place. Seating himself in the shade, for the days were now quite dry and hot, he began to wonder at the cause of Miriam's delay. She was quite late, and when she did appear, walking among the stately palms, it seemed to him that she came with reluctance. The impression roused him to anger; doubtless she was recalling and resenting his actions with Tanith.

But the truth was that Miriam lagged only because she believed that he was still absent; the thick shrubbery hid him from her view, and she walked slowly, thinking of the news she had just heard of her cousin David. The latter had sent

word to her by means of Abiram — who had studied in the school of prophets originated by Samuel — of the slaughter at Gilboa, and of the death of Saul and his son Jonathan. After Samuel's death, Abiram, during his wanderings about Palestine, had fallen into the hands of the Philistines and been taken to Gath. There he had met David, and was with David when he heard of the battle. The defeat of the Israelites had been so complete and terrible as practically to free them both from surveillance; the Philistines became very careless of their movements. David immediately took advantage of the opportunity by sending Abiram to Tyre, with a promise that it would not be long before he would have Miriam released from slavery. Abiram was still her guest. They had talked often together, and she had asked him to teach her the religion of her people. David's words and faith had stirred the memories of her childhood, and Abiram's teaching had awakened her inherent spirituality to growth. She had also been thrilled by what he could remember of David's lament for the dead king, for Jonathan, his brother-in-arms, and by the prophet's conviction that already the hearts of his countrymen were turning toward David; Abiram was certain that David would be chosen king in Saul's place.

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All this, and more, was in her mind to perplex her as she walked to meet her lover. What should she do? What should she say to him when she met him?

But when she did see Merodach waiting for her, her face shone and her hands were outstretched, impatient to feel the touch of love. But he was in a mood to believe that her welcome was forced, that her joy was assumed.

"I was telling myself that you were slow to come," she said, happily; "and all the time you were here, waiting for me. Now I am quite ashamed of myself."

"And I have been thinking that your walk was not hastened by your desire to be with me," replied Merodach, impelled by her loveliness to take her hand and draw her to a seat by his side. But she seemed to prefer to remain standing, so he too stood, holding both her hands in silence, — she satisfied in his mere presence, he wondering if she would speak of the festival, and Tanith.

Perhaps that subtle influence which sometimes exists between lovers moved her to speak as she did; for she had no real conception of the nature of her question, and she asked it with no intention of calling him to an accounting.

"Tell me," she said, "why did you leave my lady Tanith?"

Hardly were the words beyond her lips when she regretted them. They surprised her; she was startled by their import, and would have given anything not to have spoken at all. Of course Merodach misjudged her confusion, and his reply was very cold.

"I cannot say just why I left her; I was angry when I first discovered you watching us. But when I looked from her to you, she was as a toad beside a flower; it wearied me to see her."

"But you meant to stay, you wished to stay with her — till you saw me. And you were quite angry at me."

The air seemed dead to Miriam; she drew a long breath, and continued: "She has been pleased to remind me of how you are with her each Sabbath evening. How much do you love me, Merodach?"

"I cannot tell. I have often considered the wisdom of making Tanith my wife. I feel the day will come when I shall conquer the world, and I ask myself, What could be better than to select my queen from the women of Tyre? There is the sea to be won as well as the land; Tanith is the daughter of the man owning the largest fleets,

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so I went often to see her and to learn more of her nature."

"You do not fail of frankness," exclaimed Miriam, and he was perversely glad to see the effect of his cruelty. "Would it please my lord; the captain, to speak also his views concerning the humble slave?"

"I have even considered that it was possible to have Tanith for my queen, and Miriam for my concubine."

This bitter and unexpected blow stunned Miriam. But wrath quickly took the place of weakness, and she was superb when she turned from him without a word; she was sublime in mingled scorn and outraged purity. Merodach could have bitten out his tongue for the wrong he had done, for he was nearer then to perfect love for her than ever before. For an instant he feared that he had lost her for ever, but she soon returned and fiercely whispered:

"Are there no weapons in Tyre, that I should see her in your arms?"

At which Merodach laughed aloud and caught her in his arms.

"Is it not enough that I did leave her? Is it not enough that you had power to destroy the might of her charms? No, no, Miriam, I have you fast.

How foolish it is for you to struggle; it is not my arms that hold you, but my love. Now I have loosed you altogether, — and now you have returned to the prison that you pretended to wish to leave, to the jailer you pretended to hate. Am I quite beyond your forgiveness?"

"It was like death to see you then. Your face was toward her; her eyes were drinking your beauty. I could not move; I could not speak. But your concubine! — my love has made me forgetful, — better death! Your arms are not worthy to keep me. I pray you to free me of your embrace."

"By Ishtar! I will not free you. You were speechless, but you were fairer than Ishtar when I saw you, and Tanith became loathsome as some crawling thing. My folly fell from me, and I beheld clearly. So I have come here to meet you. I will not let you go until you tell me why you came so slowly. I saw you under the palms, and you were not as one going to meet a lover. Yet you cannot help loving me."

"Sometimes I try not to love you, — but I cannot help it, — it is stronger than I!" cried Miriam, kissing him and clinging passionately to him. "Your gods are not mine, and I am such a little portion of your life; even now you are preparing to leave me, and your mind is full of great desires.

You wish to conquer the world, but I crave only your heart. I am frightened when I think of what you wish me to be; and my cousin has sent me word that I am not forgotten. Soon he will be able to free me and protect me. Saul and Jonathan are both dead; David will be king. He is my cousin and your friend; he wishes to have me give you his remembrance. Put away your thoughts of conquest; there is nothing like love and peace. Take me to the land of Israel, and I will make you contented in the home we will build together. This is why I loitered on the way, — I know of nothing that will compare with our love for each other. Make me your kingdom, Merodach!"

"To be born, to live, to love, and to die," said he, with something of scorn in his voice. "To leave nothing behind one save children is to be as the beasts. I have heard that the kings of Egypt build great tombs — like mountains — that their children's children, to a thousand generations, may not forget them. And the deeds of my father's father, of Tiglath-Pileser, the great king, the mighty warrior, are they not recorded on tablets of brick? His name will be a power in the land of Asshur after his bones have long been dust. Such men are never forgotten. And I, too, will build for myself a monument of glorious deeds. It is good to be

remembered. Love is sweet; the favour of woman beautifies the life of a hero, but women and love and life pass away and are soon gone. It is only greatness that is eternal. I have thought of a love that would make a wife satisfied only through seeing the success of the loved one's efforts. Such love in a woman is more precious than wealth of silver or gold or precious stones. I love you, Miriam, I desire your love; yet when it is used to draw me to lower things, when it places common happiness and peace above achievement, when it hangs as a heavy burden about the neck of him struggling to climb ever higher and higher, — it is but the love of a concubine. From my boyhood I have thought continually upon the things which make and which mar the men who have in them the seeds of greatness. It has seemed to me that there are three errors which destroy most men: babbling lips, the love of wine, and commerce with a frivolous woman.

“I have spoken frankly with you, Miriam, because I have hoped to find such an helpmeet in you. You have called me unworthy because I considered the plan of making you my concubine. I ask your forgiveness for the thought. I offer you the best I can give you; will you be my wife? Tell

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me, Miriam, will you give me the love I desire of you?"

The last particle of anger had left Miriam's heart. He had, it is true, spoken slightly of the life she had pictured to him; but his earnestness had destroyed the sting of refusal. All that was strongest in her nature responded to the strength of his. It was as if she beheld him far above all other men, as if he were reaching from inaccessible heights to lift her to his side. She was dazzled by the glory which seemed to shine about him; she was amazed when she thought of his wishing to share it with her. Somehow he had made it all appear new to her, or she had come to a fuller appreciation of what it might be.

"I cannot tell why it is," she said; "but, oh, I would not have you lesser or weaker. You have honoured me above my deserts; I seem to have a new conception of love, but I am still perplexed, still afraid, still divided by love for you and doubt of myself. I can see now that it will be best for us to be parted for a season. I cannot think calmly while you are near. If you think me worthy of such a position, it is right that I should consider the matter with all the wisdom I may possess. I will meditate day and night during your absence; when you return my word shall be yea or nay. The

sweetness and bitterness of your proffer are beyond my comprehension, — as is also my love for you, O Merodach!”

“Now I know that you will be my queen,” said he, rising and looking proudly down upon her upturned face. “You have promised to think of my wish. I will keep that promise with me, and, when I return, I am sure that you will not say me nay.”

Here, to make clear what follows, it should be known that Hector had not been able to resist the impulse to tell Tanith that he would claim his reward that very night. Already he had assumed to himself the credit and glory of accomplishing the death of Merodach. “It is impossible for me to fail,” he had exultingly declared. “I will prove my love to-night, Tanith. This very night I will bring you the head of the man you hate.”

So proud was his bearing, so assured his words, that Tanith began to believe him. She became convinced that, in some way, he would succeed, and a great longing impelled her to secure a last look at Merodach before he was “lost in nothingness.” So she called her maidens to put on her most beautiful robe, to paint her face, to perfume her hair and cord it in massive braids above her forehead.

She would prove to him, once and for all, that there was none like her he had scorned.

And after she had been arrayed and prepared to her own satisfaction, it seemed as if her gods were determined to aid her; for she discovered Hadad on the street before her house, making love to one of her slaves. Hadad had spent freely of his recent earnings, and the result was very apparent; he was loquaciously drunk. Tanith heard him speak of the Assyrian, just a word, but it set her to questioning and bribing until she learned where he was.

From this it followed that when Merodach and Miriam started for the city, they came face to face with the lady Tanith, and she knew that they were together as lovers.

Hadad had not told her of Miriam, and her unexpected appearance with him filled Tanith with jealousy, rage, and a sense of defeat. She could neither move nor speak; she stood, silent and expressionless, in the glaring light of the glade; but her very lack of apparent emotion was terrible to those who knew her.

Slowly and quietly, and with no sign of reluctance, the two came out of the shade to meet her. As if met for mortal combat, desired by each, they three accepted the moment as inevitable, as a forecast of final victory or defeat. Their crossing re-

gards neither wavered nor flamed, they were as swords in the hands of cool, relentless duellists in the beginning of the combat. But, as all uncovered they stood beneath the sun, sharp pain darted behind the Assyrian's eyes, and suddenly the blackness of night hid Tanith's face.

His legs wavered, he was afraid that he should fall, and his hand sought Miriam's shoulder and rested there for support. So strange, so incomprehensible was this loss of vision that, for an instant, it unnerved him and made him solicitous for help. Yet his sightless eyes remained full on Tanith, and she detected no evidence of his internal anguish and weakness. Instead, she was daunted by the new expression of his gaze, by its awesome appearance. She saw his hand reach to Miriam's shoulder, and felt the action to be a defiance, an indication of his will to protect her slave from harm or wrong. To Miriam that touch of her lover's hand was inexpressibly reassuring.

Then, even as it came, the darkness left him, suddenly, completely. Tanith's face and figure were once more distinct against their background of shade, and the blessing of sight was surpassingly sweet. Brightness also dispelled the mystery from his aspect, and Tanith lost her feeling of defeat in her consciousness of nearness to the one she loved.

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He was dearer than ever before. She had doomed him to death, she should not see him again, and she was resolved to snatch a fleeting happiness before it was too late. Like a sleek, deadly, purring tiger-cat, she would enjoy her prey, now that it could not escape her claws.

Her sensuous nature gloated over the perfections of her victim; the poise of his neck and head delighted her, his strength and grace surprised her as being new and unrivalled. She spoke trifles, she was cunning to display her own attractiveness and excelling beauty, until they were amazed and troubled by her graciousness. The threatened combat was changed to friendliness; but Miriam and Mero-dach felt that her complacency was as thin ice beneath their feet, that it covered unfathomable depths.

"Even when you are dead, you will be more beautiful than Melkarth," she said regretfully to herself when she left him. "But my vengeance shall scorch Miriam till her loveliness shall become a loathsome thing." Yet honey never dripped sweeter from the comb than fell the words of Tannith's parting.

CHAPTER XV.

THE REWARD OF HECTOR

As has been said, Hiram the king and Esmun the prince were business partners. They had covenanted honesty and fair dealing, one with the other, and an equitable division of the firm's profits. Yet the king had been sorely tempted to hide from Esmun the real project of the new undertaking.

But unfortunately for his peace of mind, the king had a business conscience, as was true of most of the great merchants of Tyre. He was bound to his partner by bonds of fairness; he would be lacking in business honour, should he attempt to secure to himself the entire profits which must result from the discovery of a water route to the country of tin. He had been inspired with a belief in the star of Merodach; he was certain that the Assyrian would dare the perils and terrors of the unknown sea and attain his purpose.

The temptation to reap all the benefits of that

success was almost irresistible. Yet the king did finally overcome his weakness, and he enjoyed to the full the surprise and admiration displayed by his partner over the audacity of the plan. They two never tired of discussing the probabilities and the possibilities of success. They would pore over their private maps, tracing carefully the course they thought their vessels should take; they inventoried again and again the qualities of their captain; they were well-nigh suffocated by the certainty of the enormous wealth that success must bring them.

For the first time in years the merchant was keeping a secret from his daughter. His reason for so doing was purely a business one; he would not permit the inconceivable folly of her female heart to endanger a venture which might make him and his royal partner the richest men in the world.

There was a time when he had feared Merodach, when he had even gone so far as to second her plot of having Nathan one of his company; nor had he shrunk from the idea of the Assyrian's death. But now matters were vastly different, and Merodach was as the apple of his eye. Therefore when Tanith gave him an inkling of her deadly purpose, he was furious at what he now considered to be the rankest perversity. Under these circumstances he felt that it would be worse than folly to inform

her of the water route, for she was immovable when she had set her resolve. His one chance would be to deceive her, to disguise his true desires, and to get the Assyrian and the expedition away before she could act.

Already he had cunningly managed to have the men of the company sworn to faithfulness before the altar of the Cabirim without her knowledge; and he was fortunate enough to have all the offerings, customary before long and dangerous voyages, made without arousing her suspicions. Indeed both he and his daughter were anxious to use the same means for entirely different ends; for she approved of this unusual haste, thinking it would lull Merodach into a sense of security.

Everything was therefore arranged to enable Esmun to do the very last thing in his power for the success of the wonderful expedition; he waited at the warehouse till the arrival of his captain, — who came there direct from his meeting with Miriam and Tanith, — and instructed him to sail that very night.

The command was in perfect accord with the other's wishes, and the two passed the time, till it became dark, in a final review of the details of the project. This done, they bade each other good-speed, and Merodach went aboard the ship; but

the merchant still waited alone in his office, determined to see the execution of his instructions.

But at this last moment, when everything was seemingly going well, the star of Tanith rose in the ascendant; for no sooner was the Assyrian aboard than he learned that three of his men were absent without permission. Nathan and Chna and Hadad were the guilty ones; the scheme of the subtle Greek was beginning to work.

The absence of Chna was a serious one, as he intended to make the veteran his lieutenant; moreover, he had a high opinion of Hadad — when he should be removed from the seductions of the city. But the disobedience of Nathan gave the Assyrian nothing but the keenest satisfaction. He would go himself and find the leprous truant, and there should be one scoundrel less in the land of the living.

Wherefore, bidding the sailing-master to have their vessels in readiness to start the instant he returned, he set out for the "Tavern of the Jolly Dwarfs," sure of finding his quarry. As luck would have it, Esmun did not see him leave the ship. Something caused the merchant to quit his post of observation for a few minutes, and Merodach was lost in the darkness when he got back, ignorant of what was happening.

Merodach quitted the tavern, disappointed by the emptiness it had for him. He stood awhile at its door full of perplexity, then went slowly up the street toward a den of, if possible, lower character. He had heard Hadad speak of the place; perhaps they were there. But the truants were much closer; Nathan, Chna, and Hadad had seen him enter the tavern. Chna had predicted the course of events to that point, and they had hidden themselves near the door. Now they came out and followed him like three shadows.

Suddenly a dog rose from his bed in the filthy street, stretched himself, and went off at a slouching trot. The light of a brazier fell on the animal's gaunt body, revealing its colour to the Assyrian; the cur was amazingly yellow. "‘A yellow dog walks side by side with sure misfortune,’" he muttered, recalling an old Babylonian proverb, and pausing to watch the beast. "The gods of Babylon are not so mighty as the gods of Assyria, but it may be that they have sent me warning. I was certain that I should find them in the ‘Jolly Dwarfs,’ and it may be that I got there too soon; it may be that they are now there. By the horns of Nebo! it must be so, for even now the yellow brute is whining before the door of the house I meant to

enter; failure and disappointment are surely there, — I will go back to the 'Jolly Dwarfs.' ”

Whereupon he began so suddenly to retrace his steps, as to convince the three dogging him that they had been discovered. Concealment was therefore useless, they thought, and Nathan, reckless and savage, placed himself bodily in his commander's path.

“I have come to seek thee,” said Merodach. “Look thy fill as thy time is short. Thou hast disobeyed me, and thou must die. There is no pity in my heart, for I have never loved thee.”

The light of the not far distant brazier fell on the leper's distorted face and snarling lips, as he leaped and struck fiercely at his captain's throat. But the latter evaded the onset, caught his wrist, and wrenched it so that the sword dropped from Nathan's hand to the street.

“I will not defile my sword with thy blood, but slay thee with thine own weapon,” said the Assyrian, choking him and bending him downward till he lay prostrate and powerless on his back. “Thou hast always meant me harm; from the beginning I knew thee as mine enemy. Listen, Nathan; my hand is at your throat; you shall die like a choked dog unless you tell me the cause of your enmity. A brave man has no fear of a sol-

dier's death; tell me the truth and I will remove my hand from your throat and let out your life with your own good steel."

Nathan wished to die in silence, but he could not endure the torture of suffocation. He signalled his willingness to speak, and the other loosened his grasp.

"'Twas because of Hector the Greek," he said, thickly. "The drunken fool babbled of the reward thy death should bring us from Tanith, the princess. Strike quick, — if thou wilt."

And Merodach struck quickly and surely.

The night was some two hours older when Chna and Hadad, the former carrying a wine-skin, knocked at the door of a modest house on a side street leading into the Great Square.

Hector opened the door almost before their summons had sounded. The curiously wrought lamp trembled in his hand, and his voice was thin and strained, as he asked:

"Have you got it? Is it indeed you, Chna? Have you — but where is Nathan? Come in; don't stand in the street, — we might be heard."

Hadad laughed noisily; he had been drinking all day, and he swayed from side to side, leering tipsily at the wine-skin. Hector caught his arm, drew

him into the room and shut the door. Chna cursed Hadad for a fool descended from a line of fools for generations innumerable. The veteran was even surlier than usual, and Hector noticed that his left arm was bandaged and bloody. Chna undid the bandages, grumbling and paying no attention to the Greek's questions and exclamations, until he had uncovered an ugly-looking wound.

"That's what it cost," he growled. "We claim Nathan's share."

"But where is Nathan?" asked Hector, glancing furtively and shrinkingly at the wine-skin.

"Dead," replied Chna.

"Gone on a visit to Muth in the Land of Nothingness," laughed Hadad.

"And is it there?" inquired Hector, pointing to the skin at Chna's feet.

"It's there," said Chna. "We perfumed it and wrapped it in the cloth you gave us. But we claim Nathan's share."

A deep sigh of relief escaped the Greek, an exultant light shone in his eyes.

"Tell me how you did it? Surely 'twas like meeting a lion in the desert."

"Nathan did the hunting. The lot fell to Nathan for the first blow, and the fool met the Assyrian

face to face, and was like a child in his grasp. Nathan is dead."

"And you and Hadad? —"

"I leaped on him from behind and held his arms. Hadad struck him where the head joins the neck, but not quick enough to save me from this. It is late; we claim Nathan's share."

"Did he cry out?"

"Not a word. It is getting late."

Hector sighed again for happiness, and gave him the money. Chna counted it, assisted by Hadad, piece by piece; saw that they had the full amount, laid the skin at Hector's feet, and went out, saying nothing. Hadad followed, with the hope that Hector would not drink too deeply of the wine he had bought.

The Greek stared for several minutes as if fascinated by the bundle they had left him. After awhile he lifted it, as if to test its weight. His form dilated, a proud smile lit his face, and, blowing out the light, he went with his bundle to see Tanith.

Not long, and he had tapped lightly on the bronze shield beside her door. The door swung softly open, and he saw a white figure outlined in the darkness.

“Who is there?” asked a low voice, the voice of Tanith.

“I, — Hector.”

Tanith beckoned to him, and he followed her to her room in the story above. Closing the door behind them, she drew close the heavy curtains, and sat down on her couch, watching him while he opened the wine-skin and took from it a bundle wrapped in finest linen. She shivered ever so slightly and pointed to a stand. Hector carefully placed the bundle on it, and waited for her to speak.

There was but one lamp burning in the room; the place appeared gloomy, even weird to Hector, and Tanith was very quiet. She appeared to have forgotten his presence; she looked continually at the bundle upon the stand; she was absolutely motionless, she would not speak. It seemed ages before she motioned him to a stool at her feet.

“Sit here,” she said, caressingly. “I doubted you, my friend. I almost thought that he was invincible.” Her hands passed gently through Hector’s shining hair. “Tell me how you did it,” she whispered.

“He had commanded that none should leave the ships without permission. I got old Chna to disobey, for I was sure that Merodach would come after him himself. I was also certain that he

would seek him at the 'Tavern of the Jolly Dwarfs.' So I waited for him near the tavern."

Tanith's hand slipped very softly down his cheek till it touched his neck and clung to it, and drew his head to rest against her knee.

"It was certain that he would go; you are very wise to plan," she murmured, and her voice stirred Hector's blood as will soft, strong wine. He was beginning to see himself waiting for Merodach, his lie was becoming truth to him. His words came faster, easier; he was exhilarated by the interest of his story; he was intoxicated by her nearness; the touch of her hands thrilled him.

He related how, at last, he saw the Assyrian coming toward the tavern. He confessed that he had been tempted to strike him from behind; but she had doubted his courage, and he determined to show her how greatly she had wronged him. He was there to please her, to win her, — that was enough to make a coward brave. Therefore he met Merodach face to face, as became a man. He described the fury of the other's assault. It was marvellous to see his modesty when he admitted that things looked dark for him before the Assyrian slipped. It was the fortune of war, the gods had fought on his side, — Merodach was dead.

Hector pointed expressively toward the stand, and held his peace.

All during his story he had felt her hand through his hair, and down his cheek to his neck.

"And you wish me to believe that you did it for love of me?" said Tanith, her hand like velvet on his neck.

"I would die for you, Tanith — for love of you," he exclaimed, passionately.

"Nay, nay, Hector; your words are surely extravagant boasting. Men often speak so to me; but, when the test comes, they gladly live without my love."

"But I have proved my truth. A lion were easier to meet than Merodach. Words could not describe the fearful rush, — you would not forget your promise? I have done all that you wished."

"You have done all I wished," she dreamily repeated. "You have dared the lion's leap, and still you live. You have slain him for me, — who could believe that such a cowardly, crawling thing could slay him! Oh, you liar! you foul, sneaking liar! You cannot move, you cannot stir for fear of me, — you say you met him face to face. Oh, you killed him, but you lay coiled as a snake, you stabbed him in the back — in the dark — without one word of warning. Even now there is death

in your heart, — and you say you fought him. You lie! you lie! And you hoped to possess me! I loved him, fool! I love him now. He had to die because of my love, so I sent you to do my will. When you promised to slay him, I swore to myself that you should join him, that you should die should you succeed. If you had a thousand lives, I would take them all — slowly — slowly.”

An icy shiver passed through the Greek. He strove to lift her hand from resting on his throat, but he could not move a finger. He was frozen with fear, he stared upward at her face, motionless, utterly speechless. She beheld his terror and smiled down at him, mocking his voiceless prayer. Then he wished to close his eyes, to escape her gaze, but his muscles were fixed beyond his power to will. And she dallied with the sweetness of his death; she laid the cool edge of her knife against his cheek, she kissed his staring eyes.

But suddenly they heard a gentle clangour from the shield below, — some one was seeking admission. The sound loosened the spell binding the Greek; a shrill cry broke from his lips, he attempted to rise, but the uplifted hand fell and Tanith rose to her feet, leaving her dagger imbedded in his throat.

She smiled as she stood, watching him die. Then

she ran to the stand and fondled the bundle against her breast, as a mother her child. Once more she heard the brazen summons.

Hastily removing Hector's body to her bedroom, she went down and opened the door to her visitor, and saw the figure of Merodach.

First her hands were stretched toward him, but shrinkingly, then to the wall to save her from falling. She could not distinguish his face, but his eyes seemed to scorch her through the darkness. It was impossible to mistake his form, it was indeed Merodach come back to haunt her. A flood of tenderness overwhelmed her sense of guilt, and she tried to speak to him; but her words died in her throat. Then horror leaped to life, and she fled, breathless and voiceless, back to her room, and there she saw again — as something new — the bundle on the stand. He was here, and he was there, she thought, and, fleeing into her bedroom, she almost fell over Hector's body. Spurning it with her foot, she cried out in sudden anger. But she instantly forgot him and returned to the stand.

Tears ran down her cheeks. Kissing the bundle, she slowly undid its linen wrappings, then shrieked, as the loathsome head of Nathan the leper fell from her hands to the floor. For a moment she was altogether beside herself, she knew not what to

think. But into her bewilderment came the consciousness of a bodily presence, and she looked about her and beheld the Assyrian, standing as he had stood when she had slain the panther. Running to him, she fell, sobbing, against his breast.

Disconcerted and amazed by her unlooked-for action, Merodach held her in close embrace, and pondered the reason for it. He was positive that Nathan had not lied to him, that Tanith had inspired the attempt so recently foiled. Chna and Hadad had informed him of the bargain for his head, and of the wily veteran's scheme for fooling the Greek. He had seen them decapitate the dead leper, and had just witnessed Tanith's horror over the opened bundle. This was all quite plain and easy to comprehend, and he had deliberately delayed his visit to her that she might have time to receive Nathan's head.

In the outset he had resolved to take complete vengeance; she deserved no mercy, and he would reproach her and kill her, and for ever free himself of her devilries. But later he had remembered Miriam, and, fearful of her safety during his long absence, he had finally concluded to frighten Tanith into harmlessness.

Thus, soldier as he was, he had carefully perfected his plan of campaign before entering the

field of operation. Yet here, in the very beginning of battle, he found his plans awry; his enemy was weeping in his arms. And he knew that her tears were genuine, nor could he doubt the adoration of her eyes.

He felt her hand upon his cheek, he was moved by the abandon of her love; Tanith had never been powerless to tempt him. Yet until now he had mistrusted her, until this unmistakable sincerity of her passion led him into error, and he considered himself her conqueror; he would impose terms upon his captive.

Consequently he began to be stern with her. He had good reason, he said, to suspect her, and he was there to warn her of his growing impatience. He went even further, he told her that he had meditated her death; and so great was his earnestness, his blindness, that he failed to notice that her hand had left his face. Contrition and shame blended with the love in her gaze. She tremulously sighed, she was charming in unusual womanliness.

"You are very stern, my lord," she timidly complained. "Yet you cannot destroy my love," and, drawing a little from him, — loosening his embrace, — she snatched the dagger from his belt, and smote him hard and fair upon the breast.

So shrewd was the blow that Merodach must

have joined Hector and Nathan, were it not for the golden disk that Miriam had given him. As it was, the dagger glanced across the disk, severed its golden chain, and slashed his chest.

Instantly appreciating the folly of his imaginings, yet filled with admiration of her reckless courage, he enfolded her in an embrace that crushed her into helplessness. Tighter and tighter became his clasp, till she gasped for breath. Yet, cool as he was to calculate and quick to note the effect of what he did, nevertheless he trembled because it was she he held, and his voice was husky with passion.

“By the girdle of Ishtar! By Ashtoreth! I should kill you now, — but I cannot. ’Tis but a little tightening of my arms, and you die here, against the breast you have smitten. There was deadly anger in my heart; I meant not to spare you. Even now your soft throat tempts me, my fingers long to clutch it. By Asshur! I meant to kill you — but your beauty has overcome me. My hatred is turned to love, — you have won me against my will. Behold you are free, Tanith. Here is the knife; strike, Tanith, — my heart is uncovered for your blow.”

Tanith took the knife and held it for an instant,

then returned it to his belt, a strange change coming over her face.

"The gods have saved you from my wrath. I promised love to the cowardly Greek in return for your head. Hector is dead, and I have only the head of Nathan the leper. Never before has my hand failed of performing my will; but to-night I struck, and you are still alive. I felt your arms about me, I beheld the promise of death in your gaze, and it was as if Melkarth himself were come to rule me. Now you bid me strike, — and I find that I have become the slave of my lord."

"Do you truly love me, Tanith?"

"As I have never loved before. There is nothing I am not willing to do to prove my truth."

"Will you wait for my return? To-night I shall sail for the waters of the Unknown Sea. Asshur has sent me to do a mighty deed. Will you faithfully await my return?"

"I will wait, my lord, until either you or your dead body is here to release me. You will not fail in your undertaking. I cannot know now why I am not as I have been; I only know that I am for ever yours, Merodach."

Here she was silent a long time, thinking deeply. At last she put her hands upon his shoulders and kissed his cheeks and lips.

“It may be that this new love will keep me from the evil spirits which have so long possessed me. I shall watch for you day by day, but — O Mero-dach! should you be false — should you be false!”

And thus they parted before the long voyage. He felt that he had won the fight, that Miriam was safe. But, as he paused and looked back at Tanith, standing in the doorway, he was tempted to tell her the truth. Would it not be better to relinquish the expedition? Would it not be wiser to go with Miriam to Palestine and be happy in her love?

But the temptation passed, and he went on his way to the end.

CHAPTER XVI.

HADAD DRINKS TO TANITH'S HEALTH

ABOUT two hours later there was a small party gathered on the wharf to watch the departure of the expedition.

Esmun had been surprised by the appearance of Merodach accompanied by the king. A little later still, his surprise was changed to consternation by the coming of his daughter with Hiram Abif. But he soon learned that she was not there to prevent the sailing of the ships, and he came from his place of concealment and joined them on the wharf.

Merodach had gone from Tanith to remind the king of his promise to befriend Miriam, to watch over her during the coming months. He also hinted to the king that he distrusted Tanith.

The little group waited until the vessels had cleared the islands and were well out to sea. They shouted their last farewells, and then took the usual subject of the chance of success or failure. All

had been impressed by their last view of the Assyrian as he stood, eager and quite forgetful of their presence, in the bow of his ship. The mystery of the unknown sea, the expectancy of marvellous adventures were urging him westward. Love was sweet in times of idleness, but the opportunity to do and dare was infinitely higher. There were malignant spirits, demons of the deep, to be overcome, new lands to be discovered; he could think of nothing save the future. Miriam and Tanith, the hopes and ambitions of Esmun and the king, the art and philosophy of the great and wayward artist, had ceased to be; and the watchers felt that they had no place in this hour of his triumph.

So plain was this to be seen that the king began speaking of it to Tanith. They were a little apart from the others, and he also deemed it a favourable time to inform her of his purpose to protect Miriam. By well-directed, yet imperceptible effort, he controlled the conversation and led it until they spoke naturally of the Jewess. As if he felt assured of her knowledge of the fact, he enlightened Tanith of her father's promise of freeing Miriam at the proper time. He alluded, moreover, to Miriam's kinship to David, as it provided him a fortunate opportunity for showing his good-will to one likely to be king of a neighbouring state. He had no doubt that

David would eventually conquer the Philistines; and it would be a fine stroke of policy to secure friends willing to supply Sidonia with grain and other provisions. Indeed he had had a long interview with Abiram that very day concerning these matters, and the Israelites and Phœnicians would surely be friends.

So unusually confidential was the king as rather to overshoot his mark. He was, in fact, still young enough to become enamoured of his own dexterity, and Tanith became very curious to learn what this wonderful frankness might mean. She was, therefore, prepared for the summing up of the matter, and preserved a fine carelessness during its presentation.

Not only would it be wise on David's account, said the king, for him to cultivate Miriam, but it would be even better by such means to draw the fangs of that daring adventurer, Merodach. Let him marry the Hebrew maiden, let her cousin David become all-powerful in southern Syria, and it would naturally follow that the Phœnicians would be left masters of the sea, and of its commerce.

Taking everything into consideration, the king was quite successful in destroying the structure Merodach had laboured so hard to rear, and this

with the most friendly intentions toward the builder.

“Have you certain knowledge that he will marry Miriam?” asked Tanith, as one speaks to fill an idle moment.

“I cannot doubt it. He did not tell me so directly, but his language to me to-night was simple to comprehend. He will surely wed her on his return.”

“At what hour did he tell you?” inquired Tanith, still hoping that the answer might prove her fears to be groundless.

“He asked me to — he talked with me of her while we were walking together on our way here.”

“And that was after he left me,” said she to herself. Then aloud, — “It is growing late, and the breeze from the water is chilly. I will return to my home, — if the king will permit.”

Her heart was in a tumult; she longed to hide herself where she could give full sway to the rage and self-scorn almost strangling her. He had played with her to the last, — and she had been glad to believe him.

Hastening to her room, she crossed its threshold and saw the golden disk lying among some furs. Miriam had worn it before her, had told how she got it. She discovered the mark on it

made by the knife; the gift of Miriam had saved Merodach's life. It was true that he was gone, but Miriam was in her power, and she would strike him through Miriam.

It would not be far from the truth to say that this night marked a distinct change in the character of Tanith. Until then, her actions for good or evil — outside of mercantile matters — had been largely impulsive. For while it had been her custom to attain her desires in spite of intervening obstacles, whether material or moral, it was also true that, hitherto, circumstances had not roused her to the full use of her evil qualities. For the first time, she found herself opposed by a will at least equal to her own, in conjunction with equal subtlety and a like use of questionable methods.

Success in accomplishing her impulses in the past gave her memories which were as fuel to the inward fire now consuming her. Truly, it may be said that, for a time, her passions were molten, in seething ferment; and that when they cooled and hardened, it was in the mould of undying enmity and cruelest purpose toward Miriam. Nor was it necessary that the punishment of her slave should be immediate. On the contrary, the thought of delay pleased Tanith; she could thereby nurse her hatred and enjoy it till she might use it most

effectively. It was her dearest luxury to have Miriam near her, to shower benefits upon her slave, to display toward her the perfection of graciousness.

In one year — or more — Merodach would return, completely successful. Tanith had easily informed herself of the real nature of his undertaking. He had inspired her with absolute confidence in his ability to control the most adverse happenings. He must succeed, and she had no doubt that, after she had disposed of Miriam, he must finally turn to her. Yet he had made her suffer, and he must first receive his punishment.

This outline of Tanith's inner life, during the first months of the Assyrian's absence, will serve to explain what was to her slave an engrossing problem. In the beginning, Miriam distrusted the favour of her mistress, but as time passed, and she saw no change, she became much bewildered. She began to question the justness of her suspicions; there were even periods when she had a curious affection for her mistress, and even Hiram, the dwarf, began to wonder at the inexplicable sweetness of the woman he loved.

Yet the artist was not altogether deceived. He believed in her ability to pursue consistently to the end. She had manifested such capacity in business

transactions, and he often mused in secret over the probability of her present conduct being a carefully conceived plan outside of business.

Therefore, he bided his time in a curious mixture of suspicious foreboding and a keen enjoyment of her unwonted complacency. If her new and persistent kindness should be a cunningly devised veil to mask the workings of a sinister scheme, he was artist enough to appreciate the skill of its workmanship.

This was Hiram the artist. But Hiram the lover often tried to prove to the artist that Tanith was beginning to overlook his deformity, that it was barely possible that she might grow to love him. How else could he interpret the increasing preference she had begun to show for his society? She was constantly with him. It was strange that, keen as he was, he never realized how often their conversation was about their mutual friend, Merodach.

Leaving now this well-nigh inextricable tangle of human vanity, deceit, and passion, let us dwell briefly on the beginning of the great famine. That year the land showed signs of drought. Baal-Hamon, the burning sun, dried up the moisture of air and ground, and the crops of barley and millet seed fell much below the average. The Prince Esmun held many conferences with his daughter

over the prospective value of cereals, so that even tin and the purple murex-fish became subjects of momentary significance, as they watched the rise of the price of grain. They scanned both earth and sky, they kept a business hand continually on the pulse of trade. The stores of grain were growing low, the air seemed parched and lifeless, and the reports from Egypt were disquieting.

Sometimes Miriam was present during these conferences, for Tanith could not be happy without her favourite slave, and one day they discussed the wisdom of buying up the entire market of cereals. Miriam heard them, and that evening she told her mistress of Joseph, and of his management during the years of Egyptian plenty and famine. The story appealed strongly to Tanith. She repeated it to her father, and the house of Esmun began those far-reaching operations which ended in its gaining control of the supply of grain. They filled their granaries, and built new ones; they bought largely, and sold sparingly, and so early were they in their action that their fellow merchants laughed at them in secret, and sold them what they had.

But as days went by and the rains failed, and, still later, when the watchers in the north saw the trickling waters of the river Adonis in place of the

blood-red torrent of flood-time, many began to grumble because Esmun owned all the grain.

Discontent showed a haggard face amongst the poor, and the king began to be tormented by petitions for a general sacrifice to Baal-Moloch. Trouble was fomenting deep down among the dregs, and the king feared the rising of the passions of the lower people. He recalled the half-hearted riot of the Feast of Brands; what might not happen during the excitement of general propitiation? Many of the rich would undoubtedly seek to escape, as they had in the past, by buying children of the poor. Worst of all, the king was himself a father, and he shuddered to think that even he might be called upon to furnish the offering.

Naturally, he sought to put off the evil day. He increased his guard of mercenaries, and he bitterly regretted the absence of Merodach. By this time more than a year had elapsed since he had watched the Assyrian from the wharf, and it was possible for them to have news of him any day. And once more Prince Esmun commenced to haunt his island warehouse for a sight of a returning fleet.

Finally, he had his reward, and even the famine, now become a certainty, was forgotten in the excitement of the arrival of the fleet laden with tin. There were also rumours of fierce battles in the

mountains, of the unequalled daring of Merodach and his company. It was reported that a vessel, a bireme from Gadir, had landed several days ago at Arvad. It was said to have passed the slower-sailing freighters, carrying the tin, and news had come from Arvad. This was, indeed, the truth, and Esmun and Tanith, with thousands of others, impatiently waited to see their ships.

Best of all, that night Hiram the king, Esmun the prince, and the lady Tanith, sat late listening to Hadad, the messenger of Merodach. Worn, and suffering, as he was, from a terrible wound, it was a pleasing sight to see Hadad expand and grow radiant under the spell of unlimited wine and eager listeners.

And this is the tale he told:

"Next to the honour of speaking for the pleasure of my lord the king, and for the ears of Esmun the prince, and to my lady Tanith, is my glory in having served under that greatest of captains, Merodach," he began, for it should be known that Hadad prided himself upon his ability to suit his conversation to the requirements of his varied audiences.

"For no one can deny that only a great commander could have controlled five score of the bravest and most lawless men in all Sidonia. But

I will now begin with the first incident of our voyage. On the seventh day out the god Esmun blew fiercely against us, and the waves bid fair to overwhelm us in the very start. Three strong men were swept overboard and drowned, and we began to vow offerings to the gods, and to long for the shelter and the flagons of the 'Jolly Dwarfs.' I speak the truth, my lord the king, and am not ashamed to own my fear, nor to testify that our commander was the only one who kept an even voice and a pleasant face during the storm. Even Chna, the best sailor on the sea, forgot to curse, and growled a prayer.

"The tempest was at its height when our captain sent the word that there was something wrong in our ship. He declared that the storm was to warn us of a traitor, that the gods were angry, and that, unless we discovered the identity of the one secretly plotting against him, all would be lost — save only himself. Whereupon, Chna, the next in command, and I, the officer next to Chna, began to cast lots upon the crew; but no man was taken."

"How can that be true?" exclaimed the king. "Were not the lots all marked with the names of the men aboard?"

"All were marked; I myself saw Chna mark them. But the lot drawn was blank, and we sat

foolish in the storm, listening to Chna blaspheme. Finally, Chna informed our captain of the mystery, and Merodach was silent for a time. But at last he said: 'It must be that a traitor is hidden amongst us; search the ship.' This we did, and one — I cannot remember who — discovered Hanno, the friend of Nathan the leper, hiding among the stores."

"And where was Nathan?" suddenly asked the merchant. "Before our ships left the wharf I saw Chna and Nathan and you go ashore; but now it comes to me that only you and Chna returned. Where was Nathan? And tell me of Hector. My daughter told me how, at the last moment, he had decided to join the expedition. I would not interrupt the narrative, but I have always been curious to know how Hector fared, for every one knew his hatred of the sea. Has the Greek done worthily?"

It was as though the merchant had pricked the bubble of Hadad's swelling pride, leaving him flat and empty. Only too well did he remember why Nathan did not accompany the expedition. But what was this fable of Hector? Hector had not sailed with them; what did Esmun mean? A cold sweat broke out from every pore, and Hadad glanced stealthily at Tanith, but her impassive face was beyond his reading. Only she and Zagros, her

Nubian slave, knew Hector's resting-place. Lies and deceit and deadly peril were thick about him, he could only move blindly onward as Fate should direct him.

"'Tis true, Nathan — returned not with us," agreed Hadad, sick with terror. "We met the lord Merodach, and he — he ordered us to return, but Nathan refused. As for the Greek, there is little to say. He kept the company's stores, he was our captain's clerk; he was killed by the barbarians in our first battle. Hector was quite useless on the sea, but he surprised us all by his bravery on land."

"And what said your lord Merodach when Nathan refused to obey?" asked Tanith, pleasantly.

A crushing weight was lifted from Hadad's heart. He drew a long breath, and laughed, boisterously. "He let his sword speak for him, and Chna and I dropped Nathan's — what once was Nathan, into the harbour."

Then, continuing his narrative, he said: "Hanno was there for mischief, so we cast him overboard as an offering to the gods. It was as if the last breath of the storm bore from us his drowning cry, for the offering was accepted, and we were sent a calm. It was wonderful to see, yet Chna chuckled, and swore that my lord Merodach had known of

Hanno's presence in the ship three days before the storm."

Hadad paused, and drank deeply.

"You said it was Chna who marked the lots," observed Tanith, rising and filling her cup.

"Yes, my lady Tanith, he let no other hand but his own touch them."

"Of course the men were all satisfied to know of Chna's carefulness?" she suggested.

A queer look passed over Hadad's face. He recalled how often his ancient partner had cheated him while gambling; he remembered the night in the tavern, when he and Nathan and Chna had cast lots to determine which of them should strike the Assyrian first. And he had a very vivid recollection of the sly glances the old scoundrel gave him when Nathan was selected. Chna had even chuckled then, and whispered: "The gods never desert us when I cast the lots." But that would keep till he saw Chna again, so he went on with his story.

"From that night, till we landed at the mouth of the great river (the Rhone), — there is nothing to relate save this, — each day our company was compelled by our commander to spend at least an hour in the places of the rowers. Later I came to understand why he forced us to such hardship, and why

he so often relieved the sailing-master from sailing the ship. At that time I knew nothing of what was to come."

The three listeners exchanged glances, and bent nearer to Hadad.

"There is also little worth telling of our journey overland to meet the caravan. But from the day we left the temple of Melkarth, amid the snow on the mountain, till the day we had the first sight of your ships by the shore, we fought our way and marked it by our dead. We were always outnumbered; the barbarians were as the sands, and fierce as wolves. They assailed us when we ate our meals, upon the march, and while we slept. We learned then to know the full greatness of our leader; he never despaired; he was always cheerful with us and terrible to them; we were his children, and he gave us food, starving that he might give it. And in our last battle, when we were reduced to a scant three score of hungry, yet unconquerable fighters against a countless horde, we won the victory. And, during that fight, when I was wounded almost to death, and was a prisoner, my lord fought his way alone to save me. He saved me, and I love him better than my life, but he made me leave him when he needed me the most; for my own sake he did it.

“Now, my lord the king, and Prince Esmun, and my lady Tanith, I am sent to tell you this: after we had loaded the tin that we had saved for you, our commander took us — his own men — alone into a place beneath the trees. He spoke to us of the battles we had fought with him, of the bleaching bones of our dead comrades. Yea, he spoke till we were as wax, as melted wax in his hands. He had trained us, we were his handiwork; he knew us and we knew him, and he had but to say the word, and we would follow him — anywhere. He told us that it was in our power to make our names immortal. Wounded as I was, I lay there and heard him, and wept because I could not crawl to him and touch him. ‘Who of you will go with me beyond the Pillars of Melkarth and find the land of tin?’ he asked. Chna spoke first, then all the rest, swearing to go over the end of the earth if he bade them. By Esmun! and by Ashtoreth! you should have seen his face!

“Then he came to me where I lay, and talked to me like a brother. He said that I must come back to you, that he would leave me in Gadir, and that after I became well I must bring you this word. It was really because of my wound that he sent me; he knew that I should be happier dying

with him, — but he told me that obedience was greater than service.”

Tanith gazed curiously at the tear-stained face of this man, once the most reckless and lawless of vagabonds. She knew that he was above his associates intellectually, and she had despised him for the wreck he had made of his life. It was past her power of comprehension to understand how Merodach had been able to change him; he was become dangerous in his awakened manhood.

“After that we went to Gadir,” he said, hastily. “There our commander secured a fast-sailing bireme, manned it altogether with our company, and I — I saw them sail away. It was a long time before I was able to come back. And now, my lord the king, I am instructed to deliver the king this message: He told me to assure the lord our king that he would come back with success, or die failing.”

“You have done well,” exclaimed the king. “You have been brave and loyal. I will not fail to reward you as you deserve.” The merchant likewise praised him; and Tanith held to him her own cup, speaking so sweetly that he knew not what he drank.

But after he had left them, and was walking in the Great Square, his feet became heavy as lead. He

could not feel them touch the ground; they were icy cold, and the chill crept slowly upward. With much difficulty he dragged himself step by step toward the "Jolly Dwarfs;" he would rest there for the night. But at last he understood that the numbness of death was reaching his heart, and he sat down on a door-step and died, remembering how Tanith had smiled as she gave him the cup.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE UNKNOWN SEA

Now passing from the story of Hadad to Mero-dach himself, it may be better for us to know more of the thoughts of his scheming brain. It was a fact that distance and absence had power to weaken the influence which Tanith had over him when they were together; for there was more in his conduct with her than mere dissimulation. But what influence she did have had its strength chiefly through his bodily senses.

With Miriam and his love for her, the truth was quite different. She drew his spirit, and, as the first glow of triumph gave place to the routine and cares belonging to the voyage, he began to think of her. He felt that she was near him, and often, when he was alone in the night, he could see her face and form. Sometimes he tried to bring to his mental vision the features of Tanith, but the picture was always blurred and exceedingly vague. And this seemed strange to him and unaccountable,

because he had been with Tanith oftener than with Miriam.

In the commencement of what might be termed this spiritual companionship, his memory presented no more than Miriam's physical perfections. But one night, as he lay wrapped in his cloak in the snow, she seemed to speak to him, and from then onward he found his mind stored with her words. Then he stopped trying to think of Tanith, and his love for Miriam opened from bud to blossom and bloom, and deep pleasure and keen longing entered his heart. This vividness of his memories was very precious, but he yearned to be with her, and at last he fully appreciated her desire to be alone with him, to spend their lives together among her native hills. This he deemed a weakness, yet it moved him mightily.

Besides this there was another disturbing element in these reveries. There were times when she seemed to commune with him, as she had when they were alone together in the artist's house, and tell him of her wish to be truer and better. Such thoughts were not pleasing company, to say the least, and he strove to dispel them with ambitious plans and pleas of expediency. Yet the leaven was hid in the measure of meal, and Merodach would never again be just as he was before he met her.

Thus, with Hadad's narrative of the captain, and this presentment of the man, we have, in a measure, knowledge of Merodach when he called for volunteers for the search for the land of tin.

Several weeks had elapsed since their vessel sailed from Gadir, and the daring adventurers were in the last stages of exhaustion, on account of the storms which had driven them far to the west from the Bay of Biscay. So far they had suffered nothing beyond the privations and dangers peculiar to a seafaring life. There had been contrary winds and fierce storms in plenty, but they were familiar with the tempestuous mistrals of the Mediterranean, and many had been shipwrecked on the rocky headlands of Greece. But they had not seen the malignant spirits which were believed to haunt these unharvested waters, nor had they been swept over the end of the earth.

Yet this past week had destroyed the careless cheerfulness arising from dangers past. For six days and six nights they had fled before the storm; their mast and sails were gone, oars had been broken by buffeting waves, and they were lost on a shoreless sea. Many had come to fear that the gods were against them, that at last they were in the grip of a merciless fate; and Chna had warned his

chief of the probability of a mutiny. Worse still, Chna himself, while true to Merodach, had begun to take dark views of the outcome of the expedition. Their supply of fresh water and provisions was running low, they were already on half-allowance, and starvation must inevitably bring trouble.

This was not news to Merodach, for he had considered the problem that very morning; and he had calculated that, even with the most favouring winds and seas, they would be entirely out of food and drink before they could retrace their course to land.

He listened patiently to his lieutenant's report, made while they two stood clinging to the bulwark in the stern. "You have spoken nothing but the truth," he quietly admitted. "We must fight hunger and thirst as well as storm. But is it really true, old friend, that the time has come for us to fight among ourselves?"

"The men have discovered that the food cannot last, that it will all be gone in three days; they are beginning to curse you. Twice this morning they have thrown down their oars and sworn that it is better to die comfortably than to starve slowly. First they wish to kill you; then fill themselves with the wine now left, and scuttle the ship — and all drown together."

The quiet of Chna's manner, and the total absence of his usual profanity, told more than his words. It appeared that he, too, felt the uselessness of further labour, that he considered their plight hopeless.

"Hunger and thirst are terrible foes," said the captain. "Our army was met by both on its march across the desert to Damascus. The bones of many are now bleaching where the vultures left them. Many gave up, like cowards; they emptied the wine-skins, and died like drunken fools. But we who endured, lived to enjoy the hospitality of your king. If all the rest fail us, if they try to kill me, what will you do, Chna?"

"I'll slay the first that come, and die fighting for my captain," said the veteran, doggedly. "The waves are going down, the wind is changing, but it is even as I feared: the cowards have thrown down their oars; they will attack you here. Afterward they will eat and die with full bellies. Yet before I am sent to Muth, I would ask if I have in any way come short of my duty,—for I have loved thee from the day I first saw thee naked and smiling from the sea."

"You have not, old friend, nor will you now. They are more than a score to one, but we shall win; if they listen, we must win. You know the course of our journey from the sea to the temple

of Melkarth on the mountain. You heard the natives say that the tin was brought across a narrow channel to them. We have sailed northward from Gadir till now; it must be that there is a route by water to that land, and you and I will find the way — if need be, alone.”

Then further speech between them was prevented by the presence of the mutineers. They had forsaken their benches at the oars, and were gathered with drawn knives to end the voyage, and, as Chna had said, to die comfortably.

Merodach unclasped his belt, and laid it with his sword upon the deck. Then, unarmed and alone, he placed himself in their very midst. But Chna fitted an arrow to a bow, braced himself against the bulwarks, and besought the gods to help him to shoot true when the time came.

“Why have you quitted your oars?” asked their captain. “And why have you drawn your knives?”

“It is useless to row,” replied one. “It is true that our course has been changed, that we are returning toward the east; but before we can get to land we must starve. We all know that you will never agree to our desires; we know that you never give up your purpose. Therefore, we must kill you; then we will eat our fill, and die before we starve and suffer the pangs of thirst.”

"You speak truly; I will not cease trying until we reach the land of tin, or till death prevent me. Nor will I lift my hand against you who have been my true and faithful comrades. If you bind me, I shall in some way loose my bonds and bring you back to my project. Only my death can prevent the accomplishment of my purpose. Therefore, you must kill me now, my friend. I am unarmed, and in your power. Put up your bow, Chna; I command you not to shoot."

"The first one that touches so much as your garment dies in his tracks," declared Chna, raising his bow.

"Break your bow across your knee," commanded Merodach. But the veteran swore with many oaths that he would not. "Am I to be disobeyed by you, Chna?" was the quiet response.

"Just this one arrow, O master! Let me shoot but once, and they may cut my flesh in pieces," wept Chna. "'Tis but one little arrow; let me bury it in one of the cowards before Muth calls me? Oh, that Hadad were here! We three could conquer them all."

"No, Chna; you must break your bow."

Weeping bitterly, Chna did as he was bade, then tried to throw himself against the foremost, but his captain prevented him by saying:

"Not so, Chna; it is fitting that they kill me first."

"We love thee, my lord," said the spokesman of the mutineers. "We have not forgotten that thou hast been a father to us. We do not desert thee; we will all die with thee. And it is only because thy death is necessary to prevent suffering to thee and us; because we love thee, thou must lead us to Muth."

"Then we are wasting time; there is no need for further words. It is childish for us to talk."

Twice the sailor raised his knife to strike, and twice he lowered it, unstained by his commander's blood.

"By all the gods! I cannot strike!" he cried, throwing his knife into the sea. "You saved my life twice in the mountains. I will starve — my lips may crack of thirst before I harm you!"

"Then place yourself there, by the side of Chna," said his captain. "After I am dead, you may die with him, my friend."

The repentant sailor threw himself at the Assyrian's feet, and a great shout rose from every throat. "O my lord!" they cried as one, — "we are all thine! We will never forsake thee; we will follow thee to the end."

At which Chna lost himself, and danced about

the heaving deck like a madman. Slapping this one on the back, embracing that one, laughing, weeping, and laughing again, he acted as he had never done before. But Merodach was exceedingly quiet, and his face was like a benediction.

"I knew that you were my children," he finally said, raising the prostrate one, and kissing him on either cheek. "Nothing can stop us now. Back to your oars. The storm is spent. The sun breaks through the clouds. Pull for your lives. It is our turn, Chna, to row; I will take this oar, and you shall take that."

"O my lord — my lord! our hearts are thy playthings," cried Chna. "But by Melkarth! thou shalt not touch an oar. Back, men! we'll show our captain that men of Arvad are as bunglers beside us."

Cheerfulness succeeded despair; all was bustle and laughter on board the ship. Merodach took the oar at the stern, and directed their course to the north and east, while the vessel leaped under the throbbing oars.

Ten days later the last ounce of energy remaining to that lean and famished crew was exhausted in driving their ship prow-first upon the sands of one of the Scilly isles. They felt the shock of their keel against the land, and their oars dropped

from their nerveless hands as their captain leapt ashore. The long, long voyage was practically ended; they were to be done with suffering, but at that moment they were as dead men from exhaustion and hunger and thirst.

Yet when they saw Merodach slip and fall, striking his face against a stone, when they beheld their commander motionless on the beach, they forgot themselves, and were soon grouped about Chna where he sat, holding his captain's head against his breast.

There was a stream near by; some one ran and got water, and Chna bathed the Assyrian's temples, and the bruise just above his eyes. Another brought wine from the ship — the last that was left — and mixed it with water, and dripped it into his mouth. The cooling liquid refreshed the parched flesh, and Merodach showed signs of returning life. One of the men had run farther inland and found some huts and people. He had also succeeded in getting a little bread, and brought it — untasted — to Chna, to be soaked in wine and fed to their captain. The ringleader of the mutiny had done nothing but chafe his commander's limbs. Not a word had passed his lips, but the repentant tears had not ceased to wet his weather-beaten cheeks.

On a sudden the Assyrian spoke. "I have eaten and I have drunk; it is time to seek our rest. Night has come. Have all the men had drink and food, Chna? You will find a wine-skin fairly full in the stores. I saved it for them. Get it, and give them what is left. I never saw a darker night; have some one build a fire."

Chna was sorely perplexed. He gazed upward at the noonday sky. "My lord the captain," he said; "the day is only half gone; the men have neither eaten nor had anything to drink since you were hurt. But there are people here, and I will command them to get food and bring water."

This he immediately did, sending all the men away till he and Merodach were left alone. "Tell me, O my lord!" he then hoarsely whispered; "can you understand what I say?"

"I can hear quite well," replied his captain, breathing heavily.

"Look up, my lord, for it is now the hour of noon. The sun is overhead, but clouded. Look up, and tell me that you see the day?"

A great shudder passed through the dauntless chief. "It is true, Chna; the sun still shines overhead." Raising himself slowly to his feet, he stood erect, his face toward the sky. "Surely it is day

up there," he continued; "but it is altogether night, for me."

"Nay, my lord, not so!" cried Chna, trying to control his grief. "Surely you are mistaken. See, now; I am just before you, — you cannot fail to see your slave — your dog! Your eyes are now full upon me, — you smile! By Esmun! you see — you see!" His captain's eyes were wide open, his fears were only a dream.

Merodach swept his hand across his eyes two or three times, but everything was darkness. He remembered how his sight had failed him once before, when he had met Tanith among the Tyrian palms. Perchance now it would be as then, and his sight would return suddenly, as it failed. But the blow on his face had added to the fault of his optical nerves; the darkness did not pass away, and he began to believe that he had indeed gone blind.

It was long before he spoke. His eyes had not left Chna's face, and the old man had not moved from where he stood. If his captain could not see him now, then the worst must be true.

"I can tell by your voice that you are quite near me, Chna; but I cannot see you. Yet you must not weep and mourn. If it is true — it is true. Yet

I would that the gods had waited till I had seen the end of our quest."

"Look yet once again, my lord. See! I am here, my face is scarcely a hand's breadth from your own. By the seven gods! you must — you do see!"

It were pitiful to witness the old man's yearning, to hear the pathos of his voice. But his captain shook his head. "I can see nothing. Take my hand and lead me to one of the huts; it is not likely that we shall be denied shelter. I feel moisture on my face, — it is like to rain."

Chna's grief was too great for cursing, for speech. He led Merodach carefully up the gentle rise, from the sands to the grassy sward, and into a hut. An old woman rose from a stool, startled by their sudden entrance. She could not understand his words, but Chna somehow contrived to make her comprehend that they needed shelter, that his companion was blind. A torrent of exclamations poured from her lips. A man, wearing a long, black cloak, and carrying a staff, entered the hut, and stared sullenly and curiously at the intruders. The woman began to talk to him; Chna felt that there was pity in her face. The man nodded his head, and gazed again at the strangers, but with a softer expression.

He went to a corner of the room, gathered a few

skins into a pile, and, pointing to them, he made it very plain that they might be used. Chna led Mero-dach to the couch, took the food they then gave him, and gave some of it to his captain.

"Eat, Chna," said the latter, and they both made a hearty meal. Soon they heard angry shouts. It was raining hard, the men had been driven to the refuge of the ship, and had discovered their absence. They immediately suspected treachery, but Chna appeared at the door, and called to them. The entire company came from the beach, eating as they ran. They had been quite successful in their search for food, so, when they were assured of their captain's safety, they took Chna's advice and obtained shelter under a grove of trees, in sight of the hut. When the veteran turned back from the door, he found Merodach sound asleep on the skins.

Three days went by, providing rest and refreshment for the storm-worn sailors. The natives proved to be a gentle, hospitable folk, and they and the Phœnicians derived much entertainment in the attempt to make each other understood. Mero-dach had kept himself all this time absolutely alone in the hut. Chna had offered its owners gold, and they had gladly vacated it for that of a relative; since then the old man had waited upon his captain at meal-times, and had slept outside before the

door — in his cloak — like a lean and faithful old mastiff. Too loyal to resent his commander's silence, he had mourned in secret the lack of his confidence. But Merodach preserved complete silence.

Therefore it would be impossible to describe the old man's emotions when, on the morning of the fourth day, his captain groped his way to meet him at the door.

"Are you still there, Chna? I have been lacking in courtesy to a true friend," he gently said. "I crave your pardon."

Chna choked, and answered nothing. He could not have spoken for all the world.

"Are you offended, Chna?"

"O Merodach — O Merodach! O my lord!" sobbed Chna. "I am thy dog — to slay, or do thy bidding. Is it still night with thee?"

"It is still night. Now tell me, are the men well cared for? I have been forgetful, quite negligent. Call them to me so that I may speak to them."

Chna sent a loud shout down to the sea, and the company hastily assembled before the hut, and stood with bared heads in breathless silence; for all knew of their captain's affliction.

The Assyrian turned his sightless eyes as if to view them, one by one.

“Asshur has brought blindness to me, and I cannot see. I will call you by name, man by man, and you will answer me as I call. It will be as though I saw you, for as you reply your faces will be plain in my memory. I have not forgotten the appearance of one of you who have fought and sailed and starved by my side. Thus I shall begin by calling, Chna.”

“Here, my lord the captain.”

So Merodach called the roll; and those great, pagan heroes answered one by one, and wept softly, that they might not grieve him with their sorrow.

“Not one missing. To quarters!”

The men sprang like one, as if they were on board the ship. They were drilled as if they were on the ship, and they were manœuvred as soldiers on land; they repelled the attack, they assaulted in turn; they were thrown out as skirmishers or closed in mass, darting and wheeling, advancing and retreating. The natives were astonished and terrified by the celerity of their movements, the fierceness of their aspect; they were the most perfect fighting machine in the whole world.

And their commander's face was as the sun for brightness. In fancy he could see the advance and rally, the recoil and spring. “You have given me

sight," he cried. "Clean your arms, and see to the ship. We will soon take up the voyage."

Dismissing them, he reëntered the hut, sat down on the bed of skins, and began idly to finger a stone — or was it a piece of metal? — he had found on the floor. No, — surely it was not a stone. He put it in his mouth and bit it. Then he tried to break it with his fingers. He heard a peculiar creaking sound, and, calling to Chna, he bade him take the thing and bend it.

"It has the 'cry of tin,'" exclaimed the veteran. "It is tin, my lord. Where did you get it? It is surely tin."

Merodach leaped to his feet. "I found it there," pointing to the floor. "Take it quickly to the owner of the hut. Ask him where it came from; ask him — everything. Hasten, Chna!"

Chna hurried outside, then, catching sight of the man he sought, he strolled carelessly to him and began to make signs about the coming of rain. But after what seemed an eternity to the impatient captain, he returned, full of excitement.

"It is tin," he began, trying to speak calmly. "From what I could learn from that ignorant barbarian, there is a little of it here in these islands. But he gave me to understand that there is plenty to be had not many miles east of here. May flies

consume Baal-Zebub! May Ashtoreth die of unrequited love! May the fire on Melkarth's altar die for want of fuel! Curse the gods! Oh, that you were not blind! O my lord!"

"Is the vessel seaworthy, Chna? Are the men fully rested?"

"We have cleaned the ship. It is staunch and tight. The men are as flame on dry wood."

"Then gather together all the gold and silver that we have. Do not be niggardly in rewarding the people for their hospitality. Also buy what provisions you can, and make ready to sail, for the gods are with us."

Chna lost no time in getting to work. But no sooner was Merodach alone than he bowed his head to the wall, and gave vent to his restrained emotion. Tears gushed from his eyes; he wept as he had not since he was a boy. In spite of his blindness, there was yet a chance of success. He should not see the land of tin,—but he would win it.

In just three days more they had quitted the friendly island, and were threading their way to Cornwall, the goal of their quest.

Thus, in the end, Merodach reached the land he sought, and for many years Tyre was given complete monopoly of the world's supply of tin. It

may be that the tears helped to clear his sight, that they soothed his eyes and hastened the cure. Be that as it may, it is true that he was able to see dimly the land of his desire; and it was not many more days before he was ready to believe that those hours of darkness were but a fearful dream.

For the purposes of this narrative there is little to record concerning the busy period which followed their landing. Merodach entered into covenant with the black-cloaked natives. He made them his friends. He built warehouses and wharves, and enlarged the production of the precious metal. Eight men, gifted to acquire strange languages, were selected to remain after the ship left on its homeward voyage. Every arrangement was made to complete the success so well begun, and then, full of impatience and longing, the Assyrian sailed back to Miriam.

Those three days that he had spent alone in the island hut, while he was blind, had taught him some things that he could never forget. He had at last learned that his life would be a little thing without companionship with the woman whom he had so easily left. He had now full knowledge of his love for the Hebrew slave.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GOLDEN DISK

REFERENCE has already been made to Hiram's efforts to prevent his subjects from compelling him to proclaim The Great Feast of Expiation. To this end he used the yearly offerings from his cities and colonies, terming them special sacrifices to the burning god. By so doing, he hoped to overwhelm the demand for voluntary offerings. He also incited the rich to more lavish donations of their slaves; but the people saw through the plan, and became each day more insistent.

It was during this period that Tanith announced her willingness to add her best-loved slave to the yearly tribute. But the king kept his promise to Merodach by warning her that he considered himself personally responsible for Miriam's welfare. He assured her that he would risk sacrilege by tearing Miriam from the altar itself, should she attempt to make the "special vow" of that particular slave;

Miriam must be unharmed till the return of Mero-dach.

Tanith felt, rather than thought, that she detected the faintest accent on the word "till." A mocking smile was all the reply that she then made, but just before leaving, she said:

"How long after the return of the Assyrian will my lord the king continue his tender care of my choicest slave?"

"I promised until his return; I will keep my promise to the letter."

"To the very letter?" mocked Tanith.

"To the very letter," responded the king.

The result of this was that Tanith detailed the fastest bireme then afloat to scout continually for news of the expedition to the tin country. She made it her first duty to secure the earliest information of the man she still loved.

Up to the last minute the king pursued his plan of obstruction, but the pressure became too great, and he made general proclamation for the Great Sacrifice, in what is now termed the month of July. The lamentations usually observed in that month in the north, by the banks of the river Adonis, were ordered to be transferred to Tyre, to be incorporated with the sacrifice to Baal-Moloch. All loyal citizens of the realm were called upon to

seek favour of the angry god by free-will offerings of their children.

Immediately following this proclamation came an organized demand that no slaves, nor children of slaves, should be permitted in the sacrifice. Delegations of stone-cutters met representatives of the dyers. A petition was drafted and presented to the king, calling his attention to the universal suffering. It was useless, it said, for them to hope for rain, so long as the gods were deprived of their just dues. The demand was emphasized by the dregs and offscourings of the city, and there were unmistakable signs of coming trouble.

One morning placards were seen on the front doors of many dwellings of the principal merchants. And Esmun was shocked by one which reminded him that some still remembered what he had done years ago. It stated in so many words that his daughter Tanith was alive through fraud, and ended by warning him that the people would require him to appease the gods by righting the wrong. Tanith belonged to Baal-Moloch; the gift had been delayed, but only delayed.

The lady Tanith had herself taken down the placard, and she gave it to him as a spice for his morning meal. She also took this occasion to tell him that she had been threatened with violence

more than once of late. It was well known that they owned all the grain, and she was daily expecting a bread riot.

Her father gave earnest thought to the subject. They were rich enough to afford the loss of all their grain, and it might be the wisest course to donate it to the people. "It is better to have them die of overeating, than that we die of them—and lose our wealth as well," he suggested. He had no doubt that Merodach would return, crowned with success. It would be a trifling loss, after all, and such a gift would place them in the light of public benefactors.

"It is too late for us to go backward," commented Tanith, with quiet scorn. "There are many who have vowed to slay us. It is time to eat and drink, for at the feast we die."

At this place their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Miriam. Tanith gazed lovingly at her. "Tell my lord the prince what you heard," she said, as if she referred to the merest trifle.

"Many of the people have sworn to have my lady offered in the approaching sacrifice."

"When did you hear this?" asked the merchant, much disturbed.

"Your slave Elissa told me. She has a lover

among the dyers. They have mixed their blood, and sworn an oath before the altar."

Esmun hastily left them, and went to see the king. Tanith kissed Miriam, and said: "I did not think that you would be willing to warn me. But it is too late now, for the oath cannot be broken. I must surely die. Now, Miriam, what shall I leave you as a token of my love?"

Miriam had been trying to make herself believe that she had lost the bitterness that she once felt toward her mistress. She told herself repeatedly that Tanith had changed and become her friend. Yet now that she was so clearly reminded of her sister's death, her old enmity received new and stronger life. This unwonted graciousness of her mistress was a lying mask. Tanith was as she had ever been, and there could never be true friendship between them. She felt a sudden necessity to speak out boldly; she was ashamed of her former deceit and cowardice. Courage and truth were required of her; in no other way could she prove herself worthy of the love of Merodach.

Wherefore she met Tanith's cloying regard with clear-eyed scorn, and replied:

"I do not feel the need of a remembrance of any kind, my lady Tanith. Nor is it fitting that a slave

should wear the cast-off finery of an unloved mistress."

"These are brave words from you to me, Miriam. None of my slaves has received so much kindness from me as you have. I have shown you nothing but kindness, but I do not care to force my gifts upon you. It may be that you are making a serious mistake. You have certainly said enough at present. So you may go; I wish to be alone."

Miriam departed in silence, and Tanith sat brooding over the probabilities of the near future. The time set for the sacrifice was near at hand: it was certain that one of two things must happen; if Merodach should return before that event, he could quell the worst rioting, and she would have a chance of life; if he did not get back in time, nothing could save her from a horrible death. Her strong spirit did not seek to evade the thought of danger; she weighed her chances in the balance, and she was convinced that her only escape lay through him. Having fully settled upon this conviction, she began to consider what should be done to Miriam. Two full years had passed since she had determined to compensate her own sufferings by the enjoyment of Miriam's agony. In fancy she had watched her die every conceivable death; Miriam was a continual sacrifice on the altar of her

hatred. But if it were true that she herself must soon be removed from the land of the living, it were high time for her to secure the accomplishment of her imaginings. She must see her slave drink the cup of anguish to the very dregs. There must be no more delay, and, most important of all, she must devise some method which should not arouse the suspicions of the king.

Hardly had she selected her plan before she was given an exceptional opportunity to use it. As the gods should have it, one morning Miriam was assaulted by a band of rioters, because she belonged to the hated house of Esmun. One of them struck her a heavy blow on the head; she fell, and was bruised about the face and neck by the feet of the mob. At this juncture she was rescued by Zagros, the giant Nubian, and carried to the house. To all appearances Miriam was dead when Tanith first saw her.

Tanith's rage and disappointment well-nigh overcame her power of dissimulation, for she believed that she had been deprived of her dearest privilege. After all her waiting, she had missed her prey, and Miriam had been granted the boon of ordinary death. But afterward, when she detected signs of life in her slave, she began to appreciate the perfection of her opportunity of vengeance.

Everybody knew that this was her best-loved slave; that she and Miriam had grown up together. Now Miriam had been injured in her service, because of her, and it was her duty to soothe the last hours of one she had loved so well.

The whole city was moved by Tanith's condescension; such patience, such tenderness for a slave had never been seen. Tanith tended her continually; Tanith was never absent from her room; Tanith prepared with her own hands tempting luxuries for the invalid, and the most noted physician of Egypt — fortunately then in the city — was called to assist the recovery. Yet the Hebrew maiden drooped, seemingly unable to rally from the shock of her injuries. On the fourth day they composed her limbs for burial, and on the day following Miriam was placed, with fitting rites, in the private tomb already built for the Esmun family.

The prince was pleased, as well as surprised, by Tanith's grief. He hoped that her sorrow might appease the gods; yet he did not neglect to pray for the Assyrian's speedy return, for he, too, felt that their sure salvation was in the hands of Mero-dach. He attempted to inform his daughter of the comfort she had given him, but Tanith was enfolded by one of her sombre spells, and he left her to sit

motionless and brooding while he paid his regular visit to the king.

Not long after her father had gone Tanith came out of her reverie, and sent for Zagros. Zagros was hers, body and soul; he would pluck out his eyes at her bidding, he would die for her pleasure.

The result of this interview was that they two rifled the family sepulchre toward midnight, and Miriam awoke from her deathlike stupor, alone, and in absolute darkness.

For a good many minutes she lay quiet, feeling vaguely that it was night, and that she was in her bed. The effect of the opiate still clung to her, yet it gradually seemed that she smelt a strange dampness in the air. Her bed was also hard, and she wondered why it should seem so different. There were, besides, weird rustlings about her — the room was filled with disturbing sounds. Neither could she understand why it should be so very dark; hitherto a lamp had always been burning in her room. Still, that did not matter, for she need to stir ever so slightly to bring her mistress to her side with cooling drink.

It was quite beyond her power of comprehension why Tanith should be so kind to her, — after — what? She could not recall why Tanith should be unkind, but she was sure that something unpleasant

had happened between them. Yet whatever it was, she had only to make the slightest noise and Tanith would come; but she would not move. She hated Tanith; she did not wish to see her; the tenderness of her mistress was unbearable. But that constant rustling and hidden movement was exceedingly distressing. There was something quite near her face, — she heard it, she smelt it. A fetid breath fanned her cheek; she felt something chill and slimy trail against her flesh. A cry escaped her lips, and she sat upright, and the noise of scuttling feet filled her with dread.

Then she discovered that she was swathed in linen wrappings, that her hands and arms alone were free to move. Her mind had commenced to clear, and she loosed her feet, and felt from side to side. Her bed was gone; she could feel nothing but damp sand and a slimy wall. Horrified by the strangeness of her plight, she yet had strength to rise to her feet, to walk shrinkingly about the place she was in. Damp, slimy walls met her touch on every side; she was confined in an underground cell, — or was she really dead — in the Land of Nothingness?

She must have fainted at the thought, for once she felt something crawling, and she found herself prone upon the floor. A time of madness followed. Again her mind cleared, and she had confused

memories of wild gropings, of frantic rushes, of falls, of shrieks. She was much bruised, her fingers were torn and bleeding. She must have beat them against the walls—as she had dreamed. Dreamed?—no, she had not dreamed, neither was she dead. But what was this which had befallen her? Where was she? was there no chance of escape? She thought of Merodach; she must compose herself; for his sake she must be strong. And then she remembered Tanith.

Instantly her faculties returned to her. She recalled her defiance of her mistress, the riot, her confinement to her bed. Tanith had been wonderfully kind to her, had cared for her. Then a sudden flash of light illumined the mystery. She had no idea where she was, nor how she had been placed there, but she knew that Tanith had worked her evil. It was even possible that Tanith was where she could listen to her cries, that she was gloating over her terror.

If that were true, then she was altogether lost, for Tanith never relented. The courage of despair, joined with deepest hate, had nerved her to sit motionless, till the darkness was succeeded by a sickly twilight.

Day had come, and some scattered shreds of light helped her to increased strength. Those horrid,

crawling, rustling things were gone. She was in a cavern, that was plain enough. There was no sign of an opening; she could not even discover where the little light came in. She could only wait for the next development of the mystery.

Truly, that was the longest day in her life. Time seemed to stand still, and the terrors of night were increased by a craving for change of any sort. She tired of the little light she had, and the pangs of hunger and thirst enhanced her misery. Doubtless she was doomed to die of starvation. She shuddered at the prospect, until she remembered that Tanith was wont to derive pleasure from the suffering of her victims. If Tanith had brought her there, she would not fail to give herself the pleasure of witnessing the effects of her cruelty. There was not the slightest doubt that she would see her mistress before she died. Therefore, it was necessary for her to cultivate strength for the approaching ordeal. If she must die, she should do all in her power to lessen her rival's triumph.

Like a resistless undercurrent to all her thoughts was her memory of Merodach. At times she dwelt upon the grief he would feel when he learnt of her disappearance. But oftener she mourned, feeling that he was above the loss of anything save the attainment of power. She was hardly an incident

in his ambitious career; he might mourn for her, but in the end would he not marry Tanith, and, with her, rule the world? Starvation and thirst were trifles compared with such a thought.

Then darkness fell again, and the rustling of loathsome life surprised her. Each change seemed to add to the keenness of her suffering. Sometimes she thought she heard the sound of running water, and she longed to cool her tongue against the damp, foul-smelling walls. She was sorry that her body was so strong, for it would be a long time before she might escape this fierce craving, and find a measure of relief in stupor.

Yet some sleep must have come to her during the night, for there were blanks in her memory, and twice she had raised herself from the floor; and if she had not slept, how else could she have missed the entrance of a visitor? Some one had been near her that night, for she saw a little food and a small jar of water when it was day. She had almost emptied the vessel before she told herself that it might be all that she could hope for until another day. There was so small an allowance of both food and water, that she sat for many minutes, considering the wisdom of restraining her impulse to consume it at once. There was only enough to

prolong her misery; there was torture, not kindness, in the gift.

Perhaps the worst feature of this second day was the restraint which Miriam laid upon herself; the food and water were constantly tempting her, yet she withheld herself till it was again night. Then she took all there was, but quietly, and with an appearance of decorum. Afterward she felt stronger, and she began to hope that it was possible to delay her death till her lover's return. For if Merodach did get back in time, and cared enough for her to undertake her release, he would surely save her.

Such a possibility was infinitely comforting; she fell sound asleep, and was refreshed by unconsciousness. When she awoke she thought that she was dreaming, that her cavern was softly lighted and smelt sweetly of the perfume of lilies. So she drowsily closed her eyes, thinking that she might in that way prolong her enjoyment. By and by she opened her eyes just a little; the light was really there. Shutting them, she tried to deceive herself with the fancy that she was once more in her own room, but she felt the sand of her bed, and, turning, she beheld that which made her further sleep impossible. The light and fragrance were much

too real, for there sat Tanith, motionless and sombre, almost within the reach of her arm.

Miriam's first impulse was to upbraid her mistress for her cruelty. But Tanith would enjoy her passion, and she held herself quiet until she attained perfect self-control; and no sooner had she accomplished this mastery, than she found, for the moment, release from fear. Her lips were no longer sealed by the consciousness of servitude. Here, in the presence of death, she was beyond the barriers of common life, and it was her privilege to speak as to an equal. The flower of liberty blossomed in her mind, and its fragrance was very sweet. Consequently, Tanith was astonished by the voice and manner of this one doomed to know in a peculiar degree the bitterness of her revenge.

"I am surprised that you should so carefully array your beauty to visit one who was your slave," began Miriam. "Yet that is not so strange as is the presence of my lady Tanith in this place of foul odours and fouler reptiles."

"You have not been slow to discover the nature of your surroundings. Yet you should not complain at my kindness in saving you from the worms of the grave."

"If I have any reason to thank you, I wish to

know it. It has not been easy for me to think of your kindness — of late, my lady.”

“Yet, many have admired my ‘solicitude’ for my favourite slave. All Tyre is speaking of my exceptional kindness while you were dying. Then all declare that they never before heard of a common slave being buried as you were buried, Miriam. But I loved you even better dead than I loved you living.”

“Then it is really true that I am dead. When I unwrapped the linen bands, and found myself alone in this cavern, I told myself that I was certainly dead. But after I had eaten of your bounty, I changed my mind. I was not to know the mercy of death — easy death — in your dealings with me. I had no doubt that you had caused me to be here, but I am ignorant of how it was done. Will it not add to my punishment when you make everything plain to me? Tell me of my death.”

“You died, and you were buried,” exclaimed Tanith, utterly dumbfounded by Miriam’s calmness. She had dressed herself in her richest garments; she was there to feast herself with the misery of a broken, despairing victim. Instead of this, she was met by quiet scorn and galling self-possession. The desired end was still to be won. She must strike at once, and with all her power.

Placing her hand to her throat, Tanith lifted the golden disk by its chain, and settled it carelessly upon her breast — but so that it must be seen.

Miriam did not at first understand what was being done. Tanith was alone with her, and a quick spring might give her a chance for freedom. Tanith was, indeed, heavier and stronger than she, but a surprise might give her the advantage. At the worst, her plan would contain but the exchange of torture for immediate death. Carefully and stealthily Miriam gathered herself to make the attempt. Tanith did not suspect, was not looking at her. The water-jar was small, but quite large enough for her purpose. Miriam had only to snatch it up as she leapt, and one blow with it would provide her an easy victory. It was her one sure opportunity of escape, but she lost it, for, just as she was ready to spring, Tanith turned full toward her, and she saw the disk, — her present to Mero-dach, the pledge of her love.

He must have given it to her rival, and doubtless they had laughed together over it at her infatuation. He was false, he had betrayed her, — and her last chance had gone for escape, as Tanith, during the pause, had taken a knife from her bosom and laid it in her lap. Miriam was stunned, and for the time powerless. She was only fortunate in

having Tanith view her lethargy as being the essence of self-restraint. For not a word, not a movement, rewarded this display, and Tanith was compelled to speak.

"It was all exceedingly simple and beautiful. You appeared to die, and you were buried in our family vault, and I and Zagros took pity on you and ravished the grave. My faithful Zagros has died since then, and I am the only living soul that knows that you are here. To the rest of the world you are dead, quite dead, Miriam."

The utter hopelessness of her condition left Miriam the one thought of thwarting Tanith to the end. She scourged her mind to work, she forced her tongue to words. "Yet you must be careful in making your visits here. There are prying people in Tyre; there is always the danger of being followed. It would require a very little spark to light the hatred already against you to a consuming flame."

Foiled at every point, Tanith could only promise that she would heed the warning. She would also see Miriam often in her loneliness, and none should have the faintest knowledge of it.

"You spoke truly," she continued, rising, and pouring a powdery dust in the flame of her lamp; "the odours of this place are foul and sickening.

I will, at least, relieve you of them." At the same time she held a cloth, saturated with some pungent liquid, to her own nostrils. It saved her from being overcome by the stupefying vapour which spread through the cavern. In a little while Miriam was quite unconscious, and Tanith, staggering from the effects of the drug, hastened through the secret entrance, and obtained relief in the fresh air outside.

After she had recovered from her stupor, Miriam drank and ate a little of the water and food which Tanith had brought her. Then, exhausted by her recent ordeal, she fell into natural sleep, and dreamed.

It seemed that she was before the God of her cousin David. She was being doomed to unheard of agony because she had slighted the religion of her kindred for the love of Merodach. It was also as if Jehovah gibed at her love, and reminded her that the Assyrian had scorned it. Suddenly her dream changed: she beheld Tanith sitting on the throne of the world by the side of Merodach, and the golden disk flashed on her breast, brighter than the noonday sun. She had lost both her lover and her God, and she awoke, screaming.

Miriam compelled herself to sleep during part of the following day, in the hope of being thus enabled to keep awake in the night. If she could see Tan-

ith enter the cavern, she might, she thought, learn the secret of escape. But Tanith did not come that night at all, and the torture of wakefulness was past description. It must have been that Tanith had some way of seeing her prisoner, that she could time her appearance, for sometime during the succeeding day Miriam awoke, and once more beheld her mistress, watching by the side of her lamp.

“Eat and drink, Miriam, for I have wonderful news to tell you. Merodach has at last returned. He is the greatest hero in Sidonia. He has discovered the land of tin. He has sailed to the edge of the world; he only was brave enough to dare its perils, — and he has come back! he has come back!

“Eat, Miriam, eat and drink your fill. Here are the choicest dainties from my own table; here is the rarest wine from Cyprus. See! I have brought it that you might join me in a thank-offering to the gods. For my love has at last returned, crowned with glory. More than that: for several days there has been an embassy with our king, from Assyria. Asshur-ab-aram has been slain, the army has revolted, and Merodach has been proclaimed King of Assyria. Oh, you must eat, Miriam, you cannot help rejoicing with me.

You are the only one, not directly interested, who shall so soon know what has been done. For the sake of the past, I will tell you that Hiram the king, and the prince my father, have offered an alliance with the new king, — and I am to be Queen of Assyria. I could not restrain myself from hastening to inform you, Miriam, to have you share my happiness.”

Miriam made no reply, for the blessing of unconsciousness had granted her a few moments of peace; and when she returned to life Tanith was gone, and she was alone with her misery.

The worst had come, and she thought that she was ready to die. But after awhile the blood of her fathers ran swiftly through her veins. She had been deceived, cajoled, betrayed. She paced her narrow room like a restless animal; she longed to be free. If she only might see him long enough to reproach him for his hypocrisy. It was true that she had never felt sure of his love, but this indecent, heartless haste was more than she could bear. She was in torment of anger, jealousy, and despair. There was no possible escape from her prison. Only Tanith knew of her being there, and Tanith would never tell.

On a sudden she remembered her dream; God had spoken to her while she slept. Man could not

save her, but the power of Jehovah was infinite. He had saved her people, he had brought them out of the house of bondage. If God would open the door of her prison, if he would grant her the privilege of seeing Merodach, she would vow herself to his service.

“Give me this, O God of my cousin David! give me liberty, — save me from the cruel hands of them that have scorned me and persecuted me; give me vengeance on my oppressors, — and I will return to thy people. Thou shalt be my God, and I will serve thee all the days of my life.”

The calmness of exhaustion followed this brief exaltation, and she began to recall the comfort she had known while David was with her. She found herself repeating, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.” And the terrible God of her dream seemed to have changed to the loving shepherd, and the terrors of her prison were lightened.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE EYE OF ASHTORETH

TANITH spoke the truth when she told Miriam that Merodach was back, and that there was an embassy in Tyre to see him. It was true that Asshur-ab-aram had been slain, and Hiram the king and her father were quite willing to form an alliance through her marriage with the new king. But they had not yet approached him on the subject; Tanith had lied when she made Miriam believe that everything was arranged.

Therefore, it will be necessary for us to go backward in time, so as to meet Merodach as he landed from his wonderful voyage. A vast crowd had gathered near the wharf. The king and Tanith were impatiently waiting in Esmun's private office; but the merchant himself had gone out in his barge to meet the ship, and relieve his suspense.

Now he was seen, exultant and smiling, with the great captain, coming from the vessel; and

now they have passed through the shouting multitude, and the four were soon together in privacy.

The merchant's hand trembled so that he spilled the wine he was pouring. He choked and stut-tered when he invited the others to drink an offering to the gods, and to the commander of the expedition; for Esmun knew that the venture had not proved a failure. They poured out a libation, and drank in silence. After which the king took the chain from his own neck and gave it to Mero-dach.

"Hiram Abif wrought it; it is priceless, even as thou art, Merodach. Wear it till I may more fittingly show my admiration. I know that thou hast not failed, but art thou fully satisfied with thy discovery?"

"Fully, my lord the king. The ships of Tarshish will have no difficulty in making regular voyages to that country. I left eight men behind me to gather the metal, and to make complete preparations for the colony you will establish. The long and perilous journey over land is no longer necessary; you own a path for your ships on the sea. Here is a map I have drawn for you. Here is the harbour; your warehouses should be built here, and you will be the king of merchants — as you are of men. Wherefore, I am now no longer

the servant of the king; I will henceforth serve only myself."

"We will talk of this later," said the king, smiling significantly at the other two. "But to-day it is my privilege to serve you. For three days I have enjoyed the society of five of your countrymen. They are here to confer with you on matters of great importance. They have also brought your own favourite charger with them, your battle-horse, Nergal. See, he is even now before the door, waiting for his rider. Mount him, Merodach, and ride straightway to your friends at my palace. I will remain here with the prince and my lady Tanith. My palace and its servants are at your pleasure, until I shall use it as your host to-night at supper."

Merodach looked out and saw Nergal held by two or three slaves, one of them his own. He whistled softly; Nergal started, and began to strike restlessly with his fore feet. The Assyrian made the faintest chirrup through his teeth; the horse reared, shook himself free of the slaves, and came to his master in the warehouse. It was a beautiful sight to see the two together; the horse softly whinnying, his nose against his master's breast. Merodach threw his arm across his neck and spoke carelessly, as to a child. When he turned to thank the king, his eyes were moist, his voice tremulous.

"It is two years since we parted," he said, softly. "To-night I shall be able to thank you, O Hiram, — Nergal is my dearest friend. But now I will take advantage of your kindness; I will see my countrymen."

Saying which Merodach went instantly outside, followed by Nergal, and was soon speeding toward the palace.

There he learned of the army's disastrous battle with the Hittites. It had reached Assyria badly demoralized. Asshur-ab-aram had gone from bad to worse; he had striven to cover his defeat by harshness to his subjects. Some one spoke of Merodach-Pileser, the grandson of Tiglath-Pileser, for a caravan from Tyre had brought news that he was alive, was in Tyre. The army had risen, Asshur-ab-aram was slain, and five of Assyria's highest nobles were come to offer the throne to Merodach.

Such, in brief, was the message to which he listened. He had only to say the word, and he could sit on the throne of his fathers. Yet he was of too deep a nature to manifest undue surprise or readiness to accept.

"I am not unmindful of the greatness of this honour which you have shown me," he replied. "Yet, while you were speaking, I was wondering

how it came that two should be here who have ever been truest friends to Asshur-ab-aram. Ye know that I am a man of direct speech. I am not versed in the ways of courts. I have been a soldier from my youth till now. Therefore, I ask you plainly to state if there are conditions attached to my acceptance of this offer. It is always better to have a clear understanding before a decision is made."

"Far be it from us to limit our lord," exclaimed the oldest of the nobles, once prime minister to the usurper. "Thou art the rightful heir to the throne, and we are the most insignificant of thy servants. Yet there are some who have remembered the daughter of Asshur-ab-aram. She is young and comely. It has been said that it would be part of the wisdom of our lord Merodach to unite the kingdom, and to destroy the possibility of dissension, by making her his queen. But surely my lord has no need to learn of the babbling of the foolish."

No sooner had he heard this veiled demand — for such it truly was — than Merodach was filled with impatience to see Miriam. The presence of the embassy, and the unexpected offer of the kingdom, had, for the moment, caused him to forget her. But this project of marrying him to one whom he had never seen made him doubly impatient to be with her.

"I am just returned from a long and perilous voyage," he said, curbing himself. "The King of Sidonia has shown you kindness for my sake. I will consider your words, and will not delay my answer. There are a few things which command my attention. I am, as it were, compelled to ask you to remain here till I tell you yea or nay, at the noon hour to-morrow."

"It shall be as our lord desires," responded the old noble. "May my lord live for ever."

Thereupon Merodach ended the interview, and went to Hiram Abif to learn whether Miriam was with her mistress, in the island residence, or in her house on the mainland.

The artist was in his working garment, in his studio. He greeted his friend with curious diffidence, answering principally in monosyllables. The Assyrian noted his manner, and accepted it as proof that the dwarf was possessed of his evil spirits. So, after a few words of greeting, he inquired directly as to where Miriam was.

"I cannot tell," replied the artist. "I have asked myself the same question many times. There is the litter of the lady Tanith, coming down the street; ask her, Merodach. Yet I doubt if even she can tell you."

"Has Miriam left the city? You act and speak

strangely, Hiram Abif. Has anything happened to lessen our friendship?"

The dwarf placed his hands on the other's shoulders and gazed sadly in his face. "I have missed you, my friend. I have been alone and lonesome while you were away. Yet—I am sorry to see you here."

"Sorry?"

"Yes, quite sorry. My friendship is stronger now than when you left,—but I am exceedingly sorrowful. See; the lady Tanith has left the square—go to her. Ask her of Miriam, and then return to me. I will wait here till you come back."

Something must be wrong, and Merodach did not pause until he was with Tanith in her room. She looked earnestly at him, then ran to meet him with outstretched arms.

"I knew that you would come—here," she cried. "All the way back from the wharf I watched to see you. Surely it is he, I said, over and over again. But there was none like you there. Now you are truly come!"

She was softened, transfigured by love. Her lips smiled tremulously, moisture suffused her eyes; never had she seemed so womanly. She had

never ceased longing for his return; he was her god, and she craved his touch.

But he did not respond to her tenderness. Unclasping her hands from about his neck, he held her wrists, and asked, "Where is Miriam?"

"She is dead."

"How did she die?"

An icy chill froze Tanith's blood, yet she met his gaze unflinchingly. "The city has been troubled," she replied. "There have been mobs crying for bread. We own most of the grain; we are hated, and because Miriam was my servant, the rioters mistreated her, and caused her death."

"And you, — what did you do?"

"I tended her, and had her under the care of the most cunning physicians; but it was useless, and we buried her in our own tomb."

"How long ago?"

"Some three or four days, my lord Merodach."

"It is long — too long; but to-night we will take her from the tomb."

"It shall be as my lord commands; my slaves are at his disposal. At what hour shall it be done?"

Nothing could have been simpler or more straightforward than Tanith's acceptance of what was to her worse than death. He was indeed returned, but he was completely changed, his only

thought was of Miriam; her dead slave was dearer to him than her living self. There was but one thing left for her to do; she must visit Miriam for the last time. Afterward she must be with him at the empty tomb, and abide by the consequences.

“Hear me, Merodach. I hated my slave even before I knew that you loved her. She told me all while you were gone. She babbled of her good fortune — and I discovered that you had played with my love. When I knew all the truth, I vowed that nothing should prevent my repayment of your deceit. But the gods have taken her from you — she is dead — and there is no one now between us. Look at me! am I hard of feature, unpleasant to see? I am young; my brain is not weak; I am rich, and everything I have is yours, my lord — my love! Since the day I first called you before me, I have thought only of your beauty, your strong will, your surpassing manliness. You are not as other men; I have seen below the surface. Wealth is not everything that you wish, — you would hold the world in your grasp. With my wealth and my cunning united to your power and skill and perseverance, it will be yours to take. Look at me, my lord; am I not fit to be your mate?”

“Would you indeed strengthen my hands, Tanith? Should I bring the armies of Assyria here,

would you forget your kindred? Would your only thought be to increase the power of Merodach, King of Assyria?"

"I swear to you that your love is worth more to me than anything else. Make me your queen, and I will place you and your interests first; your will shall be my law. Even the gods shall not come between us, my love, you shall be my king — my only god."

Merodach led her to the couch, and said:

"You were reclining here when first I saw this room. Here was where you slew Melkarth, your panther. I saw your hand caress him, and I saw you slay him. And here is where I sat against your knee, and beheld your knife above my throat. I have lied to you, Tanith, I have deceived you, but now I am speaking the absolute truth. I have learned that you are never so deadly as when you appear the sweetest. I cannot trust you. It may be that the mob caused Miriam's death, it may be so; yet, again I ask, — how did Miriam die?"

"Of the mob. To-morrow will be the Great Sacrifice, and they are crying for my blood. They killed her, and they will kill me. For months I have known that you only could save me from the fires of Moloch. I prayed for your return. Now you are here, but you doubt me. It may be true that

I am as you say; yes, I did intend to kill you. But many months have passed since then, and you are now very dear to me. Hiram the king is your friend; ask him how Miriam died. Ask Hiram Abif; you will believe him. Now leave me, Mero-dach; I am unworthy so long as you doubt me. Yet, to-night we will take Miriam from the tomb, — if it will please you to name the hour.”

“The night after to-morrow night will serve as well. I cannot yet say what I will do with you, Tanith. But if the mob can be quelled to-morrow, I will quell it. And if the mob did harm Miriam, it shall repent — to-morrow. Now I must see Hiram Abif. Whatever may come, I promise that you shall be saved to see me again. If there is anything to be settled between us two, it shall be settled by us two.”

So soon as he was gone, Tanith started to put Miriam for ever out of her path. But she changed her mind before reaching the cabin. Sudden death was too sweet a blessing for one she so hated. Merodach might indeed open the tomb and find it empty; but who could inform him of the cavern? The secret was altogether her own, and, at the worst, she could make this last visit, then leave Miriam to starve slowly to death. So, as has been

described, she told Miriam of the Assyrian's return, and left her still alive.

It was rather strange, but Hiram Abif did not himself fully understand why he had sent his friend to Tanith. He had had an overpowering impulse to have him meet her before he knew the truth, and the dwarf waited in a strange mixture of anxiety and dread to hear what had been said and done. Yet he was conscious of something which was not surprise, when Merodach returned and abruptly declared that he had no faith in Tanith's innocence. Also he found that he was very angry with Merodach.

"Tell me all that happened," he requested. "I have known her since we were children together. It may be that I can then tell you if she spoke truth or falsehood."

"She said that Miriam is dead."

"Is that all?"

"She said that a mob had injured her."

"That is truth, absolute truth. Is that all?"

"She claimed to have once hated Miriam, but that she tended her during her sickness. Is it true that they buried her in Esmun's tomb?"

"Yes, it is true, Merodach; and she did show wonderful solicitude for her slave. It is also true

that Tanith has changed during the last two years. She has grown daily more soft and womanly."

"Yet to-day she told me that she had hated Miriam until the day she was injured," returned Merodach, darkly. "How did she treat Miriam during these last two years?"

"She must have said more than that to you. You have been a long time with her. If you would have me help you, tell me everything she said."

"She said she loved me. She reminded me of her youth, of her great wealth. She is a strange woman, Hiram Abif, for she has discovered the secret of my heart, and she used her knowledge mightily."

The dwarf laughed long and impishly. His strange merriment brought tears to his eyes, and he ran about the room, still laughing. He jeered at Merodach, declaring that Tanith had loved every man in Tyre.

"She has even made love to me — to me! Merodach. Behold us both in this mirror; you are of surpassing comeliness, and I am in every respect your opposite. Yet she smiled and smiled and smiled on me while you were away. For my lady Tanith is the embodiment of femininity, and, despite my malformation, I am still a man. Has she looked upward at you with moist, alluring eyes?"

Have you seen the flutter of her hands toward you? Or have you gazed upward at her and been melted by the languor of her downward glance? By Baal-Phegor and Ashtoreth! the scent of her unguent of lilies still perfumes this very room. She has well-nigh lived here since you left. And I, the dwarf, have discarded my working dress for purple and fine linen. I have pomaded my hair and painted my eyes. I have dyed my nails with henna. I have learned to keep my back turned from her — to hide its hump. Thee, I am cultivating a delicate lithp to tickle her earth, — for she loves me, Merodach. Oh! Oh! Oh!”

His laugh was like the grating of a file, exasperating beyond the other's endurance. “Peace!” he sternly commanded. The dwarf ceased his jeering and impish laughter, and his eyes became tender and grave.

“Surely it is not I, but an evil spirit speaking through my lips. You have known sorrow, my friend, your face is marked with suffering, — and I have been mocking you. The instant I saw you, I knew that you had met sorrow as well as success while you were away. What has happened to you, Merodach?”

“I cannot tell you. But I have known grief.”

“I have not acted the part of a friend, out-

wardly. I crave your forgiveness. Now tell me, what will you give me if I see Tanith and wring from her all the truth? I am again sinning against friendship, for true friendship neither barter nor sells. But what will you pay me for the truth, Merodach?"

"You may make your own terms. I will pay your price to the last *mina*."

"Swear that you will pay me my price, that you will give me whatever I may demand."

"I swear by Asshur, Shammus, and Vul, that I will not refuse you anything that you may ask, if you will make Tanith reveal the truth, and then tell it to me."

"Then the sooner you leave me the better. I have a feeling that she will come here sometime to-day, and I must not lose the chance of meeting her. There are times when she is wearied by the burden of her lies, and she is wont to come here and relieve herself of it. Leave me quickly, my friend, for the demon of laughter is almost strangling me. Yet tell me this: did she make you promise to protect her from to-morrow's mob?"

"She spoke of it, and I promised."

"Go, — go quickly, Merodach, — I shall choke of laughter. Oh! Oh! Oh! must it be long before I see you, Tanith! Surely the gods love your

naughtiness. Oh! Oh! Oh! he promised — and she really does love him. He is beautiful, he is straight and comely, — but had I his legs and back, there would be no need of our bargain.”

The dark spell was certainly on the great artist, for more than an hour — after he was alone — was passed in alternating fury and laughter. He laughed and wept; he sought out and destroyed drawings and gems and needlework, beautified by her face. He cursed his friend, he raved at his own deformity, and he shrieked with laughter at Tanith’s duplicity. Then he recalled the picture of Miriam, dead, and covered with flowers. She had been lovelier then than during her life, and he wept soft tears because she was gone. He had loved Miriam, but her purity had awed his love. She was far above Tanith, but he craved the latter. Yet he was wishful to preserve the memory of Miriam for his better moments, and he felt a mournful pleasure in recalling her pure loveliness, as she had lain prepared for her burial. She had appeared to be asleep. It was so soon after her death, that there was still a flush upon her cheeks. He had never seen death so beautiful. Yes, it was better for her in the Land of Nothingness, for it was true that Tanith hated her.

Then, suddenly, a strange suspicion darted into

the artist's subtle brain, and he became exceedingly impatient to see Tanith. He began to think earnestly, to question if he could obtain the whole truth from her; and by and by he began to make certain preparations for the meeting, for he was sure that she would come. Nor was he disappointed, for when it was dusk she rapped at his door, and he led her to a seat.

"The city is full of unrest," she said, languidly fanning herself. "People are arriving from all over the world. The lower streets are crowded and turbulent. To-morrow will be a terrible day in Tyre. I would that I were the king; I would teach them a lesson they would never forget."

"People seldom forget your teachings — nor you. And that is a great pity, for you have taught me to love you, and I know you too well to hope for mercy."

"Do you, indeed, love me, Hiram Abif? And how should your knowledge of me destroy the possibility of hope? Read me your riddle, for the heat has made me dull."

"Yes, Tanith; I love you. I have loved you since we played as children together. Will you be the wife of Hiram, the dwarf?"

"Most women would consider themselves fortunate as the wife of Hiram, the wonderful artist."

"That may be truth. Would you so deem yourself, as the wife of the dwarf?"

"I am still waiting for you to explain the meaning of your riddle."

"Suppose then that I was gifted with the perfection of beauty; suppose that I was straight, — say like Merodach, — would you be my wife, Tanith?"

"It is hard for me to imagine the subtlety of Hiram Abif combined with the physical beauty of Merodach. You are speaking now of one of the gods, of Melkarth himself. It would be better to ask me, would such an one think of loving me?"

"I will think about your question. As it now stands, I, an ugly dwarf, love one who is without doubt the most beautiful woman in the world. Now may it not be so that, if I were gifted with bodily graces, I might love a woman entirely different from you? That is the true meaning of the riddle, and surely it is a deep one; for the girdle of Ashtoreth seldom binds like with like."

The artist kept silence for some minutes, as if pondering the problem.

"Love is truly a great mystery," he said at last. "I can think of you loving none but a man of exceptional beauty, one of unyielding will; I can imagine you sitting by the side of a conqueror, a

king. But I cannot imagine you as the wife of a dwarf, — even of Hiram, the great artist. This is the meaning of my riddle. Is it not the truth?"

"Then if that be true, you have left me never to wed. Where is it possible to find such a man among the merchants of Tyre? There are here men enough; but they would all sell themselves for the silver of Carchemish. Merchandise and barter are poor gardens in which to grow real men. There are times when I sicken of money and the search for wealth."

"But there are men besides these of Tyre. All men are not merchants; there are others, — soldiers, for instance, like Merodach."

"It may be so," was the careless reply. "But even Merodach has been to the end of the earth in search of wealth. He has dared the Unknown Sea to find the land of tin. There are few in the world like you, Hiram Abif. Wealth is nothing to you when you desire to excel what you have already done."

Tanith became silent, and the dwarf walked restlessly about the room, mocking at the folly which had made him eager to catch at straws. She would not be frank with him, she evaded him at every point, and he was determined on having nothing less than the absolute truth.

During his years of study and experiment, he had made some strange discoveries. Once the king had jested with him, declaring that up to that moment he had told nothing but what was true. "But to-day I have a secret, and I challenge you to wring it from me," he had laughingly said. The artist had accepted the challenge, and later the king had left him, completely convinced that no secret was beyond the reach of Hiram Abif.

Perhaps the modern reader will understand the artist's cunning when he is told that Tanith saw a globe of light slowly descend from the ceiling until it hung motionless before and above her face. Quite naturally she bent her neck and gazed at the strange appearance; she could not help bending backward and watching it. The artist had disappeared, the room was hot and very still, and she began to feel drowsy. From somewhere behind her she heard a soothing yet commanding voice. "It is the Eye of Ashtoreth," it said. "It is gazing into the secret places of thine heart. There is nothing that can be hidden from its gaze."

"It is time for me to leave you," said Tanith, drowsily; but she could not rise; she could see nothing but the radiant globe. Then consciousness left her, and she was sound asleep.

The dwarf came out from his place of conceal-

ment. "Your body is in the Land of Nothingness," he whispered. "But your spirit is now mine, Tanih. Will you now speak the truth to me?"

"I will speak nothing but the truth."

"You swear it?"

"I swear to speak the truth."

"Did you cause Miriam's death? Did you incite the mob to stone her?"

"Your question is a strange one, for Miriam is not dead."

"But I saw her placed in the tomb; how can she be living?"

"She was still alive, she had not died. I gave her a sleeping potion. Zagros helped me to take her from the tomb."

"Where, then, is your slave? Where did you put her?"

"We bore her to the cavern behind my house, on the mainland."

"And Miriam is still alive?"

"Miriam is alive in the cave."

"How can I find the cave?"

"It is at the roots of the third tree from the house — eastward. There is a secret doorway; it was contrived by you five years ago. You will remember it."

"Why did you do this to Miriam?"

"Because Merodach loved her."

"What will you do with her?"

"She shall starve to death; I shall see her die by slow degrees."

"And do you love — him?"

"Better than my own life."

"But you told me that you loved me," said the dwarf, huskily.

"Can an ugly dwarf hope for love beside Merodach? I have never loved any save Merodach."

"It is time for you to awake, Tanith. I command you to come back to life," said the artist, wiping the cold sweat from his forehead.

Tanith sighed and looked to see the shining globe, but there was only a lamp burning to give the room light.

"Where is the globe, Hiram Abif?"

"The heat has made you drowsy, and you have slept and dreamed. But Tanith, could you love the dwarf enough to be his wife?"

Tanith answered, mockingly: "I am still dull with sleep. Ask me again to-morrow, and I will tell you frankly."

Then she left him, altogether ignorant of what she had said in her sleep. And Hiram Abif cursed himself for having wrung from her the torture of truth.

CHAPTER XX.

TANITH'S CHOICE

THE morning of the Day of Expiation had hardly dawned before the priests of Baal-Moloch began their bloody work. The mournful wail of Phœnician pipes, the sound of tabrets, and the steadily increasing volume of noise from the vicinity of the temple were sure indications that Baal-Moloch would not lack offerings that day.

Tanith arose from her uneasy slumbers and went to the window. Opening its lattice, she leaned out and listened to the music and the cries of the multitude. Until yesterday her life had been subject to the caprice of those who hated her. But now Mero-dach had come, and everything was changed. She had been with him at supper at the palace. She knew that the king had spoken to him of the Assyrian embassy, and of his wish to form a friendly alliance. Her father had assured her that Merodach had manifested no repugnance at the suggestion of

marriage with her. On the contrary, he had promised to give the matter the most careful consideration. That he loved Miriam had been only too evident; but he believed that she was dead; he would feel the necessity of choosing his queen, and Tanith drank deeply of the cup of anticipation. To-day there would be trouble, serious trouble, but that did not disturb her in the least. She was eager to see it come, for she knew that he had gathered his band of terrible fighters, and that they were ready for whatever might occur; and she would see to it that she did not miss the sight of her hero in battle.

From this her mind drifted back to memory of what had passed between her and Hiram Abif. She laughed softly when she recalled the fact that he had actually tried to win her. It was no slight thing to have lured him so far from his beloved art. For the first time she had seen him openly in earnest. Even Hiram Abif was not superior to all the weaknesses of man. But, after all, he was a dwarf, an ugly, subtle, amusing toy to be picked up in idle moments, to be cast carelessly aside at her will.

But just at this moment a curious phrase came to her mind, — "The Eye of Ashtoreth." There was something haunting, fascinating in the words, and

she repeated them over and over, now to herself, now aloud. The strange power of association made her see in startling clearness a globe of light hanging just above her. Ah, it was her dream, she had seen it in her dream, she had dreamed of those words in the artist's studio. "The Eye of Ash-toreth . . . there is nothing that can be hidden from its gaze," — were those last words also of her dream? Tanith shuddered and quitted the window. Hiram Abif had fearful, unknown powers; she did not enjoy the memory of having slept and dreamed in his room. The gods often spoke to people in dreams, — what if one had spoken to her then? Hiram Abif may have heard of secrets she had deemed beyond the reach of human mind.

Such a possibility disturbed her so that she sought refuge in a minute analysis of Miriam's condition. Another night of suffering had passed, and Tanith tried to imagine the horrors of such an experience. Here was a morsel to tickle her palate. As were the tunny fish and salted eels of Tarshish in a banquet, was this delicacy for her mental feast. She could not sate her appetite for vengeance. Yet it would be infinitely better to behold Miriam with her bodily eyes.

The pleasure was too tempting to be resisted. She called her tirewomen, and reclined luxuriously

upon her couch, while they trimmed and polished her finger-nails and dyed them yellow with henna. They scented her hair with her rare perfume of lilies, and piled it in glossy braids above her forehead. The lids of her eyes were darkened. Her finest robe of Egyptian linen, with its broad embroidered band, — designed by Hiram Abif, — was fastened about her waist with a belt encrusted with sparkling gems. Her feet were scented and polished, and shod with sandals of exquisite workmanship. On her brow were placed her choicest bangles. She was made dazzling, bewitching, by the deft handling of her maidens.

One of them, Onca, held a mirror that she might criticize the result of their labours. Tanith was enchanted by her own loveliness; she was without flaw or blemish, and she dismissed them with lavish reward. She told them that she was going to her home in Old Tyre, for she had heard that the water was running low, and the fishes were dying in their ponds. Onca was instructed to have her chariot brought to the door, but she besought her mistress not to go. The streets beyond the causeway were likely to be dangerous, — what were a few dying fishes to weigh against the life of her mistress?

Tanith chid her for her cowardice, rewarded her

for her loyalty, and was soon holding the reins of her milk-white horses from the desert. Beside her stood a strong Egyptian slave, and behind her was an eunuch, shading her from the sun with a parasol, the parting gift of Asshur-ab-aram. The rough Assyrian had been smitten by her charms, and had declared that she only in all Tyre was worthy to be sheltered by the parasol of Assyrian royalty.

Tanith always drove her chariot, and to-day her impatience grew as she drove. Urging her horses to their utmost limit, she was whirled like the wind over the causeway and into the streets of the older city. There the crowds were so great that she was compelled to moderate her speed. Some cursed her as she passed, others begged her for food, but she laughed at them all. They were all cravens. A blow from her whip would drive the boldest of them howling away. Let them starve if they must; the Land of Nothingness had room for them, and they were overcrowding Tyre.

Beyond this there was nothing worthy of mention in her passage through the streets. She safely reached her home, and gave reason for her presence by examining into the ravages of the drought. But now that it was possible for her to see her victim at any moment, she dallied with her impa-

tience, and delayed her visit to the cavern. After eating her noon meal, she spent two full hours in drowsy content before she slipped unnoticed from the house and reached the cave.

Slowly and noiselessly she set in motion the mechanism of the secret entrance. A great rock slid easily to one side, disclosing a narrow opening, and she passed downward into a dark passageway. The stone swung back to its resting-place; she touched what appeared to be solid rock, the wall opened, and she was in the cavern itself. First she closed the second door, then lighting her lamp, she sat quietly down beside it.

Everything was still; Miriam undoubtedly slept, so she waited till her eyes became able to see through the gloom which darkened the cave in spite of her lamp. For her there was no enjoyment so keen as these few minutes when she was waiting to catch her first glimpse of her imprisoned slave.

But as her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, she realized that Miriam was gone! No hint of the happenings of the night before was to prepare her for Miriam's absence, and she was dumfounded when she missed her. She searched the very crevices in the walls before she would believe that the place was empty, and, when the truth had forced a lodgment in her brain, her fury was of frightful

intensity. She shrieked and rushed from side to side, she was not human, she was devilish in her rage and disappointment. Rushing finally from the cavern, she sped to the house, and was soon driving recklessly back to the island.

Since morning the temper of the people had grown more savage, and they greeted her with fierce denunciation. But their curses pleased her mood. Flogging her already maddened horses, she drove faster through the thronged streets, regardless of the mischief she wrought. Many tried to stop her, but she struck them aside with her heavy whip. Others were unable to escape her terrible rush, and she passed over them remorselessly. The causeway was so packed with people on their way to the temple that it was impossible for them to open her a passage. But she flogged her horses still fiercer, and plunged into the mass, driving her chariot as to a charge. A panic ensued; some leaped, screaming, into the sea, but others of a braver sort flung themselves upon the plunging horses and threw them down. Tanith plied her whip like a flail, beating the angry faces on every side. A score of hands tore her from her chariot, and she was tossed like a cork upon a tempestuous sea. She had unloosed the whirlwind, and a raging

mob bore her toward the heart of the storm, — the scorching breath of Baal-Moloch.

"She escaped the sacrifice when a child," howled one. The cry was taken up, and the mob went mad.

"She owns all the corn in Tyre!" shrilled a hag, and tumult became pandemonium.

Yet during it all not an instant of unconsciousness had spared Tanith from a full appreciation of her peril. Her fury was changed to scorn and an alert readiness to catch the first glimpse of Mero-dach hastening to her rescue. She was sure that he would come. She longed to see him slay without mercy, to see him grind the mob to powder.

Now let us return to the early morning hours, to the meeting between Merodach and Hiram Abif.

The latter appeared to be quite weary and gloomy. He also seemed possessed of a spirit of captiousness, and the Assyrian had no doubt of his having failed with Tanith. The artist sullenly admitted that she had been with him the evening before, but he was so like an ugly child that his friend was sorely tempted to take him by the shoulders and shake him into a better humour. Yet there were other moments when the dwarf's expression filled him with tenderest compassion, for he was certainly in great misery.

Esmun and the king called together to see Mero-dach, who readily promised to use his company in the event of a riot. And truly he would have been loath to miss a chance of repaying in terrible fashion the harm done Miriam. So he kept his men constantly on the alert for news of the temper of the people.

Promptly at noon he met the Assyrian embassy, and accepted the offer of the throne, but upon one condition. While he admitted that their policy of wedding him to the daughter of the late king was a wise one, he nevertheless declared finally and absolutely that he would suit himself in the matter. He would choose his wife in accordance with his own will and pleasure.

Whereat the spokesman of the party made profound obeisance, and cried: "O king, live for ever!"

From noon till the ninth hour Merodach waited in the house of Hiram Abif. It was so convenient to the Great Square as to make it the best place in the city for his headquarters. His men were assembled in the studio, ready for whatever might arise. Chna improved this period of monotony by winning the combined wealth of the command.

At the ninth hour a scout reported from beyond the causeway that turbulent groups were forming

in the lower streets. A little later another came in, confirming the report. It was also quite evident, the latter said, that there was some sort of an organization at the bottom of the unrest. He had seen several distributing arms, and there was quiet talk of a raid on the granaries. Chna heard the news, and smiled for the first time that day. One of the band discovered the unusual radiance. "Buckle on your swords," he chuckled; "the old vulture scents blood." And another exclaimed: "By the club of Melkarth! you speak truth. It was but now our captain spoke softly to us, calling us his children. Battle is never far off when our lord is caressing."

Hardly had they ceased speaking before Chna commanded them to see that their swords and bucklers were ready to hand, and the company was prepared for an orderly dash through the doorway.

It was at this time that Hiram Abif asked Mero-dach to come to him on the floor above. Grasping his friend's arm, and speaking in a curious manner, he said:

"I heard Chna calling to your men; has the trouble really begun?"

"Two of my scouts have reported something that leads us to expect it."

"And it may begin at any time," exclaimed the

artist. "I should have told you sooner — sooner. I learnt strange news last night — marvellous news. Miriam is not dead. Speak, Merodach, did you not hear me? Miriam is not dead, — she lives, she was buried while still alive. Tanith went afterward and removed her from the tomb. She has been weak from the shock, but that will soon pass."

"Leave me," whispered the other; "I would be alone."

Awed by the effect of his words on one he had deemed superior to emotion, the artist left the room and paced restlessly about the corridor outside. By and by Merodach came to him and spoke with his customary calmness.

"You have more to tell me; speak quickly, I pray you."

For answer, the artist opened a door, pushed his friend very gently into a room, and closed the door behind him. Miriam half-rose from a low couch and uttered a choking cry. Merodach kneeled beside her, and drew her to his breast, saying nothing. Soon he held her a little from him.

"You have been with me ever since we parted," he whispered. "You have twined about the secret places of my heart, nay, — you have been a ray of pure light overcoming its darkness. You have almost made me say that I cannot live without you,

for you are the best of my life. I cannot understand how you have become so dear to me. Your hands are pleasant against my cheek. They make me think of when I was a child, when my mother used to stroke them. It is sweeter still to see your face, but I long to hear your voice; speak to me, Miriam."

"Oh, I cannot speak! You have been away, — you are with me again."

She did not remember her wish to reproach him, but, hiding her face in his breast, she wept out the horror which had grown into her heart. Time slipped by unnoticed; such silence was better than words.

"One night you came to me and besought me to hasten," he began, after a long pause. "Your face was wan and stained with tears, your hands were outstretched to draw me. I had seen you often in my dreams, but never like that. I promised the rowers great reward, but they said they would hasten for love of me. They made their oars bend like twigs; they would neither rest nor sleep till we saw the towers on the north, — and when I met Tanith, she told me that you were dead. It was strange, but I felt that I had known of it before she told me."

"She? Did Tanith say that I was dead?"

"She told me that, and Hiram Abif also told me that she had tended you, that she took you from the tomb, and —"

A terrible look came into the Assyrian's face, and he cried: "Where have you been since she took you from the tomb? Only yesterday she declared that you were dead, — I must see Tanith again."

The expression of his face and the pitiless tone of his voice gave new strength and life to Miriam. Tanith had lied; he was true, he had thought only of her.

"She removed me from the tomb, but she has kept me among crawling, slimy things in a cave. She has sat and watched me there, gloating over my misery. Oh, see her — and kill her. Do you indeed love me, Merodach? Then show it — show it. Crush her foul beauty! Slay her as you would a poisonous snake!"

Until then Miriam had felt that his love lacked depth. Now all was changed; one glance at his face was enough to assure her that his heart was wholly her own. At last they were in perfect accord, — they were one in love, one in their hatred of Tanith, and one in their purpose of a final reckoning.

So they sat together a long time silent, till they

heard the fury of the human tempest burst over the street below them. Merodach sprang to the window, flung open the lattice, and beheld the rioters sweeping like a torrent beneath him. Nothing seemed able to stop its seething, whirling rush, as from the narrow street it roared into the Great Square like an overwhelming tide. An instant before the king's guard had stood there, a wall of threatening steel. Now they were as rubbish before a spring freshet, and the filth of the great city was the crest of the horrible flood.

The constantly increasing uproar drew Miriam to lean over her lover's shoulder and gaze, fascinated by the fearful spectacle. They saw Esmun, the princely merchant, caught in the street, and heard his screams. He was gone, — swept out of existence. On a sudden, Miriam leaned far out the window.

"God of Abraham — God of David — 'tis she!" she cried, in fiercest joy. "'Tis Tanith! Oh, there is a God of the Hebrews, — he has given me the will of my heart. The proud is brought low, the cruel one eats the dust. See her! see her! buffeted and torn. O God of David! I will keep my vow!"

Swiftly and now almost silently the rushing mob swept Tanith toward the clanging arms of Baal-

Moloch. She had once escaped the sacrifice through fraud; now her captors were inexorable to right the wrong. Yet she neither struggled nor appeared afraid, nor did she try to lag; her feet kept step with the multitude. Her face was calm and inscrutable in the midst of the tempest.

But just as she reached the point below them, she raised her eyes, thinking that Hiram Abif might be there, might see her pass, and it was even possible that Merodach himself was there, waiting to release her. She beheld not the artist, but the Assyrian, and closely against him leaned Miriam, fiercely triumphant. Yet even now, when she saw the ruin of all her plans, and when she apprehended the greatness of her loss, her spirit rose above the weakness of woman. Indomitable in the face of defeat, she gazed scornfully, and cried above the tumult:

“An Assyrian coward and a Hebrew slave! — a goodly pair!”

Instantly an answering cry shrilled from behind him, and Merodach turned and saw Hiram Abif inarticulate with despair and longing. By his side was the king, waiting to give the word.

“The time has come,” he sternly commanded. “Give that mob a lesson it will never forget.”

Merodach saluted, and joined his company. Chna

shouted for joy, flung the door wide open to the street, and followed his captain into the fiercest battle of his life.

Like one man armed with two score blades of steel, the company swung into battle-line and began to slay. Shoulder to shoulder, buckler lapping buckler, they pierced straight onward, their swords darting death at every thrust. Never was machine more perfect, never the power of discipline and training more apparent. As man after man of that little body dropped from his place, the lines closed up, the band passed on, irresistible and unsparing. Chna received his death-wound as they swept into the court of the temple. Quietly and grimly he watched his companions leave him. They were swallowed up for a moment; the mob broke, flying in every direction; they reappeared, still compact, always victorious, pitiless.

"I never saw a better fight," he muttered, "nor such a captain." Then he closed his eyes and entered eternity with a smile.

Meanwhile hope was quite gone from Tanith. Merodach was with Miriam, he knew everything, her slave had won, and the noise of singing women and mournful pipes was beginning to drown the cries of the rioters. Very soon she must feel the

awful embrace of Baal-Moloch, and life and beauty would shrivel away and disappear for ever.

Nevertheless, she was still watchful to seize a reasonable opportunity of escape. Her knife was still hidden in her bosom, but she had restrained herself from using it prematurely. Until now she had waited for the chance of a rescue. But there was none willing to help, and she preferred rather to die fighting than to be offered to the burning god. She had no knowledge of the proximity of Merodach, being sure that he had remained with Miriam. Yet she took advantage of the confusion caused by his approach. Stabbing the one who had held her, she sprang on the altar before the golden asherah. The priests who had been sacrificing there had fled upon the first indication of violence, the fire of the altar was scattered, and, for the moment, she was free.

Casting a hasty glance over the court, she was thrilled by the sight of Merodach at the head of his command. His men were formed in wedge shape now, their leader at its point, and the end of the riot was near at hand. She heard a quick command, the flying wings of the wedge swung into battle front, and the line of blood-drenched swordsmen thrust quicker and struck harder. She could not understand why he should be there; it

was marvellous, incomprehensible, yet he had kept his promise, he would not let her perish.

Tanith was intoxicated with joy at his coming, transported by his terrible grandeur. He was the god of battles, his sword was a flame, he was irresistible, omnipotent, implacable.

"Oh, well struck, Merodach!" she cried. "Slay! kill! kill! and spare not! They melt before him, — they dare not meet him! Oh, the beauty of it! Again and again and again, — each stroke a life! They break — they fly, — kill them all! Oh, I have never lived till now."

Then her tongue clung to the roof of her mouth, and her joy died to ashes, for he was before her, and his face was as flint. The violence of the mob had destroyed her raiment, yet she was more glorious in her scanty rags than when fresh from the tirewomen. Merodach gazed full at her as she stood, radiant, incomparable, yet his voice had no touch of pity or of love when he said:

"I have kept my promise; you are saved from the mob. Now you must answer to me — and to Miriam. Your case is hopeless, Tanith."

"I knew that when I saw you with her at the window, — yet you have saved me from the only death I ever feared. I have ever loved you; I spared nothing to win you. But I have failed.

After you have finished with me, ask Miriam if my death will recompense her for her agony in the cave."

But when Merodach would have ended for ever her power for mischief, Hiram Abif sprang quickly between them. He had been with the company from the start. Covered with blood, utterly beside himself, he flung himself against his friend, and saved Tanith from his sword.

"You swore to give me what I asked," he cried. "Give me Tanith, — I claim her, Merodach."

The Assyrian caught the dwarf and hurled him to the ground. He raised his sword to strike, but sheathed it, saying:

"I cannot break my oath."

The dwarf staggered to his feet and ran to Tanith.

"You are saved!" he joyfully cried. "You are mine, Tanith! mine! — only mine!"

"Truly I thank thee, Hiram Abif: the slave to the Assyrian; myself to the dwarf. I am thus become a gift to be tossed from hand to hand, regardless of my will. Nay, not so; I will myself choose my lord."

And, without pause or sign of reluctance, Tanith went swiftly to the yet moving arms of the Moloch the artist had built. There she turned, and said:

“Greetings to you, Merodach and Hiram Abif; and greetings to my lord Baal-Moloch, whom I have chosen.”

After which she threw herself upon the monster's arms, and was lifted slowly upward to its yawning mouth. Then, when she had disappeared, as if its appetite was at last appeased, the empty arms of Baal-Moloch stopped, and the great day of sacrifice was at an end.

CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION

MANY thoughts had come to Miriam while she was alone in the cavern. Vague aspirations had been floating through her mind ever since her meeting with David. Heredity, the instinct of race, and her admiration for her cousin had combined to torment her with unformed yearnings. Her spirit was stirred by impelling, quickening light; it began to suffer the pangs of growth. Also her brief acquaintance with Abiram had tended to lift her aspirations out of the mire of superstition, and the discipline of solitude had strengthened, not broken, her moral fibre. Yet, at its best, her religious nature was still dwarfed and immature.

And this should be remembered, and her actions should be judged by the standard of her ignorance, of her time, and her surroundings. The God of her fathers was to her hardly more than a fetich, and her highest conception of worship was to sac-

rifice her love for Merodach, and so placate the wrath of a god of more than human jealousy. As Jacob had vowed at Bethel to serve God for a definite recompense, — this for that, bargain for bargain, — so Miriam had vowed to yield up her love if the God of David would help her against Tanith.

Now although she had been delivered from her prison, she had thought only of the sweetness of her meeting with Merodach; and now Tanith was dead; and now the king had freed her from servitude, and she was no longer a slave. Yet how hard it was for her to fulfil her vow.

It was the evening of the day after the riot; she was alone, the guest of the king; she was waiting to meet Merodach, and she would rather die than say him nay.

He came to her radiant with success and the hope of future greatness. He had just parted with the embassy which had shown him royal honours. He had discovered the water route to the land of tin, he had enriched the kingdom he meant to rule. Also the death of Tanith had relieved him of a heavy burden. She was no longer an element of uncertainty, a danger to be overcome.

Life and love, love and power and youth were his; and Miriam was to share them with him. There was not a shadow of a doubt in his mind;

she would surely be his queen. Therefore it was a glorified, transfigured lover that appeared to tempt her when her own heart was seemingly most weak and traitorous.

"Hiram told me that you were free. I am called to the throne of my fathers. Soon, very soon, I will turn my back on this land of barter and sale. I will try to reign royally and justly. Miriam, will you go with me to the City of Asshur? Will you sit with me on my throne?"

"Are you going so soon?" she asked, wishing to bask a little longer in the sunshine of his unwonted joyousness.

"I am only delaying till I have finished with the king, and till Hiram Abif has become freed of his evil spirits."

"I have heard that he cries continually, 'Tanith! Tanith!' that he wished to cut off the hand that designed the image of Baal-Moloch. Is it true that he considers himself guilty of her death?"

"He curses the day he made the god. He believes that if he had not made it she would still be alive. He speaks of having been warned of what was to come two years ago. He seems to be able to think of nothing else."

"And you yourself?" said Miriam, giving utterance to the question which troubled her more than

she knew. "Are you glad that he reminded you of your promise?"

"I cannot tell. Sometimes I am not sorry to have been prevented. But that is because I deem a sword-thrust more honourable than the arms of Baal-Moloch. She was braver than the bravest warrior,—but I cannot forget the evil she has done."

"She wore the golden disk I gave you, Mero-dach. When I was at her mercy in the cave, she cruelly increased my misery by displaying it upon her breast."

"It was then as I suspected," replied her lover, disconcerted by this sudden attack. "I went to see her the night I left. She had plotted my death, and it was my purpose to inform her of my knowledge, to call her to an accounting. Before we parted, she struck so fiercely at me that her dagger glanced from where it fell—against the disk—and severed the chain which held it. The disk must have fallen on the floor of her room. I did not discover my loss until we were miles at sea."

"When I beheld you enter the room where I lay, I knew only joy because of your return. And while I listened to you as you spoke of your love, I grew faint with happiness. But since then I have remembered that your heart has long been divided

between her and me. You have yourself admitted that you desired us both. The time has come when we must speak frankly; why did you spare Tanith when she tried to kill you?"

"I cannot altogether understand my own heart, Miriam. I will not deny that I hesitated between you two, that I desired you both. More than that, I will confess that she showed me her love that night, and that she had power then to move me in no slight degree. But even then I was concerned for your safety during my absence; I hoped to guard you by making her believe that I truly loved her. Now, despite the fact that perfect frankness is seldom wise, I am hiding nothing from you. Therefore you must believe me when I declare that so soon as I came back and met her again, I learned that her power to move me was quite gone. My love, the past is past. I am come to you with no divided love." His eyes became exceedingly tender and grave, but there was a happy, buoyant note in his voice, as he continued:

"You have thrown out your skirmishers to cover your attack, you have overwhelmed with your chariots, and your horsemen have ridden me down. Behold I yield myself your captive; for when I would flee to my stronghold for refuge, I find a traitor within its gates. I am defenceless before

you. Would you take my heart from my breast, — it is already in your keeping. Would you destroy my sight, — I am blinded for ever by your beauty. Yet I am ready always to accept whatever punishment you may inflict. See, Miriam, I am utterly at your mercy, for I am here to hold you to your promise; can you say me nay?"

His arms were about her, he kissed her cheeks and her lips, calling her the tender names his mother had used to him; he was at last the lover of her dreams, and she could not doubt him. Neither could she deny herself a taste of perfect joy. For just this once, she told herself, — to-morrow would be soon there, to-morrow she would compel herself to do the right.

But after he was gone, her conscience regained supremacy, and she discovered that the suffering imposed by exterior agencies is nothing compared with that from within, that her past agony was now not worthy of remembrance. It was impossible for her to endure long the stress of the inner conflict, she had reached the crisis, she must decide at once. Never before, in her relations with Mero-dach, had she been able to appreciate the value of certainty. For heretofore she was always the slave, Tanith the mistress; and she had been accustomed to see Tanith attain her ends. Merodach might,

for a season, vibrate from this one to the other, but in the end Tanith must win. Consequently, Miriam had found renunciation easier then than now, for now she must lose her very self in losing him. Tossed and divided by mental storm, conflicting claims, and consuming passion, it was long before she could either rest or sleep. But just at dawn the subtle opiate of self-sacrifice soothed her troubled spirit and she fell asleep, thinking that she had attained to permanent peace.

So the grist of the eternal, inexorable mills became for Merodach the flour of retribution; for now that he fully appreciated Miriam's love, he was compelled to fight against the odds of religious yearning joined to the feminine instinct of self-immolation.

At first he was dumfounded by the discovery that he must fight at all, neither could he comprehend the subtleties of the opposing foe. But he battled with all the force and resourceful stubbornness of his nature till, hopeless and utterly baffled, he was compelled to cry: "I cannot hope to win against the gods!"

No sooner had he arrived at this conclusion than, manlike, he wished to flee from the scene of his defeat. Bidding farewell to Hiram Abif, he closed his affairs with the king, and then informed Miriam

of his purpose to start early in the morning for the City of Asshur by the Damascus road.

He had accepted her decision as final. It was folly to prolong his suffering by remaining with her. But, on the other hand, Miriam treasured each moment of his presence as a miser counts his gold. She could also take the Damascus road, and join in that city some caravan for Palestine. So she prevailed upon him to accompany her thus far, and together they quitted Phœnicia for ever.

Yet, while he had acceded to her request, and had procured for her an easy-footed camel, he urged his horse to such a pace that they reached their common destination that night before the doors of its principal inn were closed.

Miriam had indulged herself the bitter pleasure of being with him to the last moment. She had impressed upon her memory each detail of her lover's appearance as he rode silent and stern by her side. During their noontime rest she made timid approaches, trying to lure him to believe in the wisdom of her course; she wished to see his face lose its haggard sternness before she left him. She was grieved by the memory of his haste in the morning. It was true that he had been full of consideration for her comfort, and his manner to her had been always gentle, but he seemed very

eager to have her safely upon her way — away from him.

Surely she would never have left him could she have seen into the most secret chamber of the heart of this masterful but defeated man. His head had pained him much upon the way. The sun had been blazing hot, and sharp pains had darted from eye to eye. Often his vision had been blurred, lacking accuracy and clearness, and a great fear had been growing in his heart. That first attack of blindness had been hardly worth remembering; but now he recalled it in connection with his affliction while on the island. It was true that he had recovered each time. He could not explain to himself why it was, yet a conviction had formed in his mind that he was soon to be blind for ever. And he was sure that such a fate would be the closing of his life. Miriam was lost, and he could not hope to claim the Assyrian throne when blind. Until now he had faced and overcome the opposition of man, he had surmounted or removed every obstacle in the path he had marked out to tread. But now, at the pinnacle of success, he found himself confronted by a wall as high as heaven; before him was a barrier he could not cross, — there was no power in mere man to overcome the fate of total blindness.

No better proof of the genuineness of his love

for Miriam could be given than this: he accepted the certainty of loss of sight, and he vowed to spare her the grief of sharing his knowledge. He would send her from him, he would see her safely started with some caravan, in ignorance of what was to befall him. Afterward it should be himself alone with Fate.

Then they parted, and then utter darkness veiled him from the world of light and beauty. He was blind, and his horse, Nergal, was the only living thing he might call his own.

He hired a boy to lead him to a shady spot by the cool waters of clear Abana, where he patiently waited while Nergal drank his fill. After bathing his aching temples, he was led to a seat beneath a tree, and, dismissing the lad, he let memory unroll the pages of his life. Nergal tired of freedom and came to poke his cool, velvety muzzle against his master's cheek. Merodach caressed his nostrils and placed his head against his breast. The horse's loving whinnies awoke him from his reverie. They had been as one on many a hard-fought field; they had plunged into the dust and tumult of battle, rejoicing in their power to fight and slay. He had slept among the dripping reeds, and Nergal had kept watch and warned him of lurking foe or prowling beast. They had been comrades in success and

defeat, but they must part. He would never again mount his faithful steed; he was blind, impotent, cast out of the action of the stirring world, and the thought of any other hand save his guiding and controlling this friend of the past could not be endured. Crawling down to the river's brink, he called Nergal to his side. He breathed heavily while he worked his horse sidewise to the stream; it was like murder to strike, but that, too, was done. He heard the splash of the horse in the river; he had stabbed him to the brain, and now, absolutely alone, he sought to retrace his course back to the tree and finish what he had begun. He would end his life beneath the tree where he had rested.

Somehow he felt it necessary to reach that one particular spot, but he became confused, turned about, he could not distinguish one tree from another, and he bruised himself in his vain attempt to return. Indeed he was quite lost when suddenly a trembling hand slipped into his own, he was guided to a pleasant place, and he heard Miriam's voice, broken, ashamed, and full of pleading.

"I could not endure the pain of my heart," she exclaimed. "After we had passed from your sight, I slipped away. I cannot live away from you. . . . I have been here watching you. I saw you kill your horse, — oh, my love! what is this mystery?"

You fell against the tree, — you act so strangely. Oh, I cannot understand what I saw!”

“I am blind, Miriam,” was all he could say. Overwhelmed by her unexpected presence, by this un hoped-for proof of her love, he could only hold her in his arms and sate himself with happiness. He had baffled Fate, he had won in spite of the gods, he had won in the very instant of defeat.

His words were like a thunderbolt to Miriam; they were incomprehensible, horrible. Then that wonderful strength of woman, that adorable quality of self-forgetfulness in the presence of suffering, sprang instantly to life. She took up at once, and with infinite content, her loving task of being eyes and sight for her lover, her lord. The inherent strength and beauty of her character blossomed to give fragrance to his life, and Miriam became more to him than throne of Assyria or sight of his eyes.

Years afterward, near their vine-clad home among the hills of Palestine, she stood beside the blind chieftain. She had set his face toward the land he had resolved to rule, and her heart swelled almost to bursting while he seemed to gaze at what might have been. Was he really content to live in quiet and with only her? she wondered wistfully.

The panorama of earthly power and glory passed

slowly, bit by bit, before his inner vision. He was long silent, but his voice was altogether cheerful and void of what she had feared when he turned to her, and said:

“Behold, thou art become my queen and my kingdom of delight, Miriam.”

THE END.

L. C. Page and Company's Announcement List of New fiction

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